THE CHINESE COAT

JENNETTE LEE

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA
SAN DIEGO

Timberlake
118 Williams St.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/chinesecoat00leejiala

BY JENNETTE LEE

THE CHINESE COAT

THE RAIN-COAT GIRL

THE GREEN JACKET

THE AIRMAN AND THE TRAMP

UNFINISHED PORTRAITS

THE SYMPHONY PLAY

AUNT JANE

THE WOMAN IN THE ALCOVE

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

THE CHINESE COAT

22509

THE CHINESE COAT

BY

JENNETTE LEE

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1920

COPYRIGHT, 1920, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Published August, 1920

TO

GERALD STANLEY LEE

"I take my way along the island's edge"

THE CHINESE COAT

THE CHINESE COAT

I

ELEANOR MORE walked away from the coat. She looked back at it across the glass case of fichus and ribbon bows, and went on down the aisle of show-cases to the coats and suits at the end. Stewart's was having a sale of coats and suits, and Eleanor More was there—not because she could afford to buy anything, even at a sale, but because she was a woman.

She had been passing the store and seen the crowd pressing in through the wide doors . . . She had hesitated a minute and gone in.

It was nearly six o'clock now, and the crowd had thinned. Here and there a wandering figure could be seen, half ready

for flight, pausing to peck at some bargain crumb; and helpers with long gray covers were appearing and shrouding the glass cases and counters for the night. The light in the shop began to seem gray and a little ghostly; out of it the gold and blue colors of the Chinese coat gleamed freshly, like a bit of Oriental flame caught in this dull sale of Western goods and held fast.

Eleanor More glanced at the coat again—down through the gray-shrouded counters. Then she turned swiftly and went back. It stood by itself on its dummy figure at the end of the glass cases; in the fading light from a window above, the fantastic gold shadows of the dragons chased each other and played hazily across it.

She halted before it, and half reached out her hand to it.

A woman with a large bust and paper cuffs on her sleeves came drifting toward her. "Anything I can show you, madam?"

Eleanor More looked up. "I was looking at this coat." Her hand moved vaguely to the dragons.

The woman's eyes followed the gesture. "It's a great bargain!" She put out her hand to it.

"Would you like to slip it on?"

Eleanor More drew back. "Oh—I wasn't thinking of buying. I was looking. I just happened—to see it——"

The woman's hands were busy with the neck of the coat. She slipped it deftly from the lay figure and held it up. "No harm in trying," she said.

Eleanor More looked at it and drew away—and came back. She held out her hands with a little laughing gesture.

"No—I cannot afford—" She put her hands into the blue sleeves with the quaint trailing ends and drew it up about her.

The woman gave a little pat to the shoulders and smiled, pointing to a long mirror at the right.

Eleanor More moved to the mirror; she stood looking at herself.

Behind her stretched the gray counters—shrouded in for the night's rest. Only a figure here and there was visible in the distance. Her eyes caught the empty spaces behind her.

"It is late!" she said hastily. "I am keeping you!" She looked over her shoulder at the woman who seemed, in the gray light, receding dimly.

But she came forward with a smile. "There is no hurry." She touched the coat and adjusted it.

"It suits you perfectly!"

Eleanor More glanced again into the long mirror. The blue and gold covered her from head to foot; and above it, her face looked out at her, a little mistily, and smiled to her.

She shook her head and the mirrored lady shook her head—slowly. Then they both smiled radiantly and the gold dragons crumpled their tails as the coat was flung swiftly back.

"I don't know why I put it on! I think it bewitched me! Here—take it! Thank you very much." She spoke—half under her breath, and the woman took the coat in her hands. She stood smoothing the folds.

"It is a great bargain—marked down for to-day." She touched the tag with casual finger, and Eleanor's eyes followed the motion.

"I know— It's absurdly cheap—and very beautiful! But I simply cannot afford it! Thank you for showing it to me—so late!" She moved, a little blindly, toward the stairs. The elevator had ceased to run.

When she was gone the woman stood with the coat in her hand irresolute. A helper coming by with an armful of gray covers cast a flitting glance at it.

"Want a top?"

But she shook her head. "I will put it in the box for to-night."

The helper went on down the aisle. The woman drew a box from beneath the counter and folded the dragons with careful hand, and smoothed their tails and placed the coat in its box. Through a bit of tissue-paper across the top of the blue and gold it gleamed and shimmered softly, and the woman brushed

light finger-tips across it as she pressed the paper down and tucked it in and set the box aside.

Then she went down the room, and disappeared among the shadows of counters and cases, and the shop was left alone. Darkness slipped in from outside, and pushed the grayness before it. It clothed the dummy figure in black, and descended on the box of dragons, blotting it out. It covered the whole room.

In the darkness beneath the counter lay the Chinese coat, with its bit of tissue-paper lying across the glory of blue and gold, safely tucked away.

Only the vast oblongs of windows remained to show faintly, against the street outside, where the light came in.

II

THAT night she dreamed of the coat. She saw its soft folds descending on her out of the sky, and she held up her hands to it and caught it to her and wrapped it about her and ran in the wind, singing. And all the dragons came alive and pranced beside her—and she threw off the coat and ran with the dragons, unclothed. And the freedom of it was like life—flooding down on her out of the sky; and then the dragons moved from her—they were receding into the distance, their great heads held high; and she ran, stumbling, after them, alone and naked—and suddenly she was in a crowded street and the people were looking at her, and shame drew about her as a vast garment; she shrank back into it, trying to hide—but there was no cover

for her—and she woke with a dry, choking sob.

She got carefully out of bed and tiptoed from the room, closing the door behind her. In the next room, she could see the daylight straggling through the curtains. She threw up the shades and watched it come. A flush of light was in the sky over the mean little houses at the rear; even the houses themselves, not yet touched by the light, had a fresh, waiting look; and in the chicken-yards the hens ran about busily, pecking at something, or nothing. In one of the vacant lots a man was hoeing. His bent back had a look of strength. As she watched him, he stopped his work a moment and looked up at the sky. Then he went on hoeing, with slow strokes.

The rooms were filled with light when she came from her bath; and she threw

open the windows, and went about getting breakfast with quick steps.

She put the plates on the table and paused and went to the door and opened it. The little porch outside, half-shaded with vines, was streaked with sunshine along the floor. She stepped out on to it, holding out her hand, as if to test the warmth.

She drew a table from the wall and brought a cloth for it and laid the table for breakfast on the porch.

Presently she looked up. A man in the doorway was surveying her with a smile.

She came across to him and lifted her face.

He bent to kiss it. "Up early, weren't you!"

"I couldn't sleep— Do you like it— out here?" She waved her hand.

"Fine!" He surveyed the table. "Couldn't be beat! Shall I bring things out?"

"I was afraid you might not like it." She poured his coffee. "Father never liked it—eating out-of-doors—at home."

"*This* is home," said the man. He was sipping his coffee and looking contentedly at the vine-shadows on the floor.

"My other home, I mean."

"You never had any other home."

"Well—what I *called* home—till I knew better!" She laughed the words at him, and he nodded gravely.

"Father used to wear his hat—some days his muffler—if we tried to eat out-of-doors. So we gave it up. I am glad you like it!"

She fell silent, watching the shadows; and he watched her face. She was quiet a long time.

The man finished his breakfast—he looked at her.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

She started. "Oh—I— Nothing very much." She flashed a little look at him and got up from the table.

"Better tell me," he suggested.

"It wasn't anything—not anything that will ever be—anything." She began to gather up dishes.

"Made you look pretty happy," he said.

"Did it?" she laughed out. She stood a moment, looking thoughtfully at the vine-shadows on the cloth. . . . "It was a coat I saw at Stewart's, yesterday—a perfectly absurd coat—for me!"

"No coat could be absurd for you—not if you wanted it!"

"Yes—I wanted it—I suppose." She looked again at the white cloth and

waited. "I think it bewitched me. . . . It was a Chinese coat, you see!"

He looked at her blankly. "A Chinese coat—for *you!*"

She nodded. "I told you it was absurd!"

"Well—" He regarded it thoughtfully. "If you want it . . . But what could you *do* with—a Chinese coat?"

"That's what I don't know." She was very meek. "I just seemed to think—I wanted it."

"You couldn't wear it to church?"

"No-o—" She hesitated. "I could wear it to the opera—if we should go."

He laughed out. "And to the circus!" He came around and touched her hair where the light fell on it. "How much did it cost—this Chinese thingumabob?"

"Fifty dollars—" It came out slowly—and he whistled softly between his teeth.

"For the opera!" he said.

She threw out her hands. "Of course I didn't mean it! But you asked me—what I was thinking about——"

"Of course I did!" He was prompt. "And I'll see what we have—to spare."

He moved toward the door. "Sure you couldn't use it for anything else"—he looked back over his shoulder—"except the opera?"

"Well—I *could* make a kimono of it." She glanced at him half-pleadingly—then she laughed out. "I don't want the old thing! I don't know *why* I told you!"

III

IF she thought of the coat through the day, there was no sign of it in her face. She went about her work with busy, preoccupied look. She did the dishes, and dusted and made beds and went to market; and after luncheon, which she had by herself on the porch, she lay down, a little while, watching the streaks of light that came through the blind-slats and fell across the matting, and almost reached to the bed . . . and when she saw them again, they were lying along the pillow close to her—and it was five o'clock.

She sprang up with a little exclamation and hurried to the kitchen.

But, after all, Richard was late, and everything was ready when he came.

He cast a happy look about the room.

"Nice home!" he said.

She smiled and set the dinner on the table.

"You were late."

"Well, rather! It's been a great day—" He looked at her thoughtfully across the table, and took up the carving-knife and tested it gently on his thumb. "Martin came in—about the lot, next door!"

She glanced quickly at him. "What did he say?"

"Said he's ready—to sell."

They were both silent.

Presently she gave a little sigh. "Well, of course we *can't*— But it's too bad!"

He looked at her, smiling. "That's the queer thing! It's just possible——"

"What do you mean?"

"Well—I'd been looking things over—about your Chinese coat, you know——"

"Oh-h!" Her glance held his.

He nodded. "I'd made up my mind to get it for you—if it took our last cent——"

"But I told you——"

He held up a hand. "And I'd just figured out how I could do it—when Martin came in and offered the lot for three hundred—fifty dollars down."

Her eyes were on his face.

"Of course, yesterday, or day before, I should have said—we couldn't do it. . . . But there was the money—in my hand, practically."

"Did you give it to him?" She leaned forward, a little breathless.

He looked at her. "Do you think I did?"

"Why—I—don't know."

He got up and came over to her and bent down. "It is *your* Chinese coat!"

he said. "You didn't suppose I was going to mortgage your possessions—without letting you know!"

"You mean I can *have* it—the coat!" She had clasped her hands—she was gazing at something far beyond him—far beyond the room, it seemed.

He watched her face a minute. "You sure can have your coat—if you want it!" he said softly.

She drew a long breath and the light ran back into her face, flooding it.

"Oh—!" She threw out her hands. "I don't want it!—I just wanted to be sure I could want it—if I wanted to!"

"I know." He looked down at her with quiet understanding.

"So it is the lot?" he said.

"Of course it is the lot! Go and eat your dinner, silly boy!"

IV

THEY were not likely to forget the night they decided to buy the lot next door. It seemed the beginning of married life together. To be sure, they had been married nearly a year and they had bought and furnished the house; they had even bought a strip of land on the other side of the house that had come into the market soon after they were married—while they still had a little money to spare.

But in all their purchases before, there had been an element that marked them off by themselves. This new purchase was something different—something entered into from choice, and with a free heart.

They called it the Chinese lot.

It was Eleanor who named it and told

Richard laughingly. But even to herself it was not a common, every-day name. It seemed a kind of dream-place, in a faint, happy light, with Chinese dragons chasing across it.

Within twenty-four hours after their decision, the deed for the lot was in Richard's pocket; and twenty-four hours later the fence between was torn down, and builders were at work on a wall that took in the new lot and made the whole place one.

Eleanor More watched the men with shining eyes. When her work was done she took her sewing-basket and went into the sunshine across the yard, and stepped over the boundary into the new lot. Just beyond the boundary was a great oak-tree, with wide branches and great roots bulging out of the ground. As she sat down under the tree, she

noted the roots; the happy thought crossed her mind of children playing there—each great root a playhouse—with little dishes and mud pies. . . . Her eyes followed the dream, as she unfolded her work and sat sewing, with the light flecking down on her and on the root playhouses and green grass.

Richard More found her there when he came home from work. He went across to see how much had been finished on the wall. Then he came back and stood and watched her swift needle and the light on her hair.

She looked up.

"Nice place!" he said approvingly.

"Yes—I like the roots!" She patted one of them beside her.

He looked at it vaguely.

"Fine!" he said.

She smiled, but she did not explain.

"Why didn't you ever sit here before?" he demanded, looking about him.

The needle paused. "Why—? . . . We never owned it before!"

"You didn't have to own it—to sit on it."

"Oh, yes I did! Owning it is half the sitting on it!"

He threw himself on the ground beside her and looked up into the oak-tree, throwing back his head.

Her puzzled eyes regarded him.

"I should never think of coming out here to sit—if we didn't own it—you know that."

"Hah! Just like a woman!"

She pricked the needle through the muslin in her hand.

"There was the fence," she said.

"Climb over!" He had taken a pipe from his pocket.

She reached out her hand. "Not before dinner!" decisively. "You'll spoil your appetite!" She captured the pipe.

"Oh, very well!" He leaned against the tree and watched her.

She was folding her sewing neatly. "I should *never* have climbed over!" She pinned the work together in a compact roll and nodded to him.

"You could have gone round—" he said with a teasing note.

"You know what I mean, Dick! I shouldn't have wanted to sit under a tree that did not belong to us—and that belonged to the Martins or to the Suttons, or to anybody—and not in our own yard—nobody would!"

"Funny idea!" said Dick slowly. "Same tree, same place, just Ours!"

She smiled at him. "Help me up! It's time for dinner."

He strolled across the grass beside her to the house, and helped set the table while she was in the kitchen.

He did not smoke his pipe. She had laid it on a high shelf over the mantel as she came in. She had to climb on a chair to reach the mantel. Dick could have reached it with one lift of his hand. But he only eyed it, half-humorously, as he set out doilies and finger-bowls and counted spoons, and called out to the kitchen to know how many forks were needed.

Not for worlds would he have taken down the pipe—not for a single whiff. He had a kind of savage pleasure in it—watching it up there—with its old familiar brown bowl turned to the wall. . . . Time had been when that pipe was his only friend. . . . He did not own a house and lot then—and an oak-tree. . . .

He peeped out of the window at the tree, serene in the evening light. . . . Suddenly he saw a Chinese Coat—blue and gold, she had said it was; and the happiness in his face deepened. He whistled softly between his teeth as he arranged forks and spoons. . . . "*Our* forks and spoons!" he said—and laughed out.

She came to the door. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing—my dear—nothing!" and she returned to the kitchen.

Richard More had not married until he was thirty-five. Eleanor was twenty-six. It had not been easy to win her. She had her tutoring to do. . . . He took her away from her home town—into his kitchen. But he knew she was happy—far happier than she had been in her little world that looked up to

her. . . . As for himself, he felt as if he moved in a new world—a great world that stretched through leagues—to the moon—or the sun. . . . The pipe-dreams of old days seemed like hen-coop dreams in the spaces in Eleanor's mind. Each day he began exploration anew; and each day, in the little circle of her being, he seemed to sweep out into the world—great cosmic paths, and tracks of stars and shining spaces. . . .

She came from the kitchen, smoothing down the sleeves of her gown and casting a last look at the table.

"Too many forks!" she said.

She removed one from each plate, and put it back in its place—neatly in its compartment in the drawer of the shining sideboard.

V

A MONTH later he hurried home one day from work. It was Saturday noon, and a half-holiday for him.

She was finishing her luncheon. The light in the half-darkened dining-room seemed to him mysterious and cool as he came in from the street outside.

She looked up in surprise. "You are home early!"

He glanced at her plate. "Through luncheon?"

"Almost— Do you want something?"

"No. I've had mine— Let's go off somewhere!"

In ten minutes she was ready and they left the house. He tucked the key in his vest pocket and they hurried across the lawn to catch an outgoing car.

As he passed the oak-tree he glanced

at it with a knowing smile. He might almost have been said to wag his head at it. And he patted the pocket where the key lay. . . . Close beside the key were five round golden disks—little yellow disks that might at any minute turn into great gold dragons.

They left the car at a fork in the road and were in the open country; they climbed a high hill, and a hill behind the high hill, and came out at last upon a bluff overlooking miles of country.

She took off her hat and sat down with a happy sigh, lifting her face to the breeze that came across the hill.

"Isn't it good!"

He nodded, without speaking. His eyes were on the mountains in the distance. His heart was talking to five gold coins that lay just over it and caused it to beat in a jolly happy rhythm.

He put out a hand and touched hers.

"Something nice has happened to-day!" he said.

She turned her eyes to him.

"I think this is pretty nice!" Her hand swept all the reach of space about them.

"Guess," he said teasingly.

"Something we want?"

"Of course. More than anything in the world," he said after a minute.

She turned her eyes on him gravely. She looked at him a full minute. "How do you know that?" she said softly.

"I know." He moved nearer to her, and they watched the light change and sweep in great shadows across the fields below. "You want it—more than anything in the world," he said, speaking slowly. "I knew you did—when I took it for the lot."

She patted the hand that lay beside her own.

"I did not want it—not so *very* much," she said. "Anyway, I wanted the lot more. . . . And, besides, I've been so busy getting ready for Annabel——"

"Getting ready for William Archer," he corrected gravely.

"Getting ready for Annabel—" she pursued, "that I have not had time to think about things—just things for myself."

"This is not just for yourself—it is for me, too."

She turned a startled, half-questioning look at him.

He nodded gayly, watching her face. "Did you think *I* didn't want that Chinese coat?"

"Oh, did you?" Her face had flushed like a child's. "I thought I was—just silly about it!"

"So you were. That's why I wanted it for you. . . . But, of course, it was sensible to get the lot."

"Of course!" Her assent was wholehearted and happy.

"So now we're going to get the coat, too—to-day. I had some money come in"—he patted his pocket—"and there's enough."

"It may be gone—!" she said quickly.

"Don't think so. I sent over word. They've got a Chinese coat."

"Oh, I *hope* it is the same one—!" She breathed a happy sigh.

"We ought to go right away!" She started up.

"Time enough." He spoke lazily. "I told them to hold it—till five o'clock." He took out his watch. "Two hours. Plenty of time."

She sank back. Presently she looked at him.

"I never *guessed* how much I—wanted it! I did not know!"—after a little pause—"I think I did not let myself know."

Then they talked for a while about Annabel—whose name was William Archer, he pointed out to her. . . . And they laid plans that ran far ahead into the future—almost till Annabel was an old lady and lonely—only she would have married by that time—and there would be other Annabels. . . . It seemed to stretch away infinitely.

It was all wonderful—and mysterious. She turned and buried her face in the moss for a long time and was very quiet.

And overhead a great bird soared and passed by. Richard watched its high circling flight.

She sat up and dried her eyes and

patted her hair and began to pin on her hat.

He watched her, smiling gravely.

"Now we will go and buy the coat," he said—"that wonderful Chinese coat —blue and gold, I think you said, my dear—with the great gold dragons on it!"

VI

AS they drew near the store he became aware that she was deeply excited; there was a little flush in her face, and she walked with quickened step. He laid his hand on her arm protectingly. But she did not slow her pace.

"Plenty of time," he said softly in her ear.

She only gave him a sidelong glance and hurried on.

"It may not be the one!" she murmured as they entered the store.

"Then we'll hunt till we find one like it!" he replied valiantly.

Through the elevator grills she recognized the woman who had waited on her before, and she went swiftly toward her.

"We have come to see the coat," she said simply.

The woman looked at her, almost in pity, it seemed.

"There's another party interested in the coat— You mean the Chinese coat, I suppose?"

Eleanor's face was blank. There was a little catch in her throat.

The woman reached down a hand beneath the counter. "We promised to hold it—" She glanced at the clock, and drew out a box.

"The other party said he was pretty sure to take it."

Through the tissue-paper a maze of blue and gold showed dimly.

She lifted the paper, throwing it back.

"I guess I'm the other party," said Richard More. He stooped forward, smiling a little.

"Of course you are!" said Eleanor with a breath of relief. "Of course you are—the 'other party'!"

She turned to the woman. "It was my husband wanted to see it," she said almost proudly.

The woman consulted a slip of paper. "Name of 'More'?" she asked.

Richard nodded. "Let's have a look at it."

The woman lifted the garment from the box and flung it wide on the counter before them; and all the color in it glowed softly and the colors that lay on the counter about it glared and seemed hard.

"Pretty thing!" said Richard More. He pulled his mustache a little nervously.

The woman lifted the coat and shook it out.

"Let madam try it on," she suggested.

She came from behind the counter and placed it on Eleanor's shoulders, smoothing the folds.

"It's not a usual garment— Not every one could wear a garment like that." She moved back a little, gazing with half-closed eyes.

"It suits madam perfectly!"

The husband surveyed it. "Turn around," he commanded.

Eleanor turned and moved from him down the cleared space to the mirror. And he was conscious of something remote in her movements. She seemed to withdraw, to hold herself removed, wrapped in the blue and gold folds of the coat.

He moved after her and she turned and faced him.

"It's all right!" he said approvingly.

He half put out his hand to touch an end of blue sleeve that trailed away to a tasselled cord. . . . Then he withdrew his hand. "It's all right!" he repeated vaguely.

The clerk came forward and lifted the tassel and let it fall in place; her fingers strayed over the garment in an easy, official way.

"How much is it?" asked Richard More.

She consulted the tag hanging on a bit of gold cord in front. She dropped it.

"Ninety-five dollars," she said indifferently.

She stooped to arrange a fold of the coat.

Eleanor More turned a little. She seemed to gaze down with wide, reproachful eyes at the woman's bent form.

Her husband's tone was crisp. "We

understood the price was—less than that," he said.

The woman straightened herself and looked at him. "That was last month—for the sale. It was marked down."

"And now it's marked up, is it?" he asked a little cynically.

She assented and touched the coat gently with her fingers, stroking it. "It is a coat Mr. Stewart bought himself," she said—"in China. He found it when he was buying goods—and liked it. But we've had it in stock some time, and he told me to mark it down for the sale. After that, when no one bought it"—she seemed to look at Eleanor almost with reproachful eyes—"then he told me to put back the original price. . . . It's more than worth it, of course."

"Of course," said Richard absently. He was wondering how much Eleanor really wanted the coat.

She had not spoken from the moment it was laid on her shoulders. She seemed to have withdrawn into it—to have become an inaccessible part of its mystery and charm.

"I had not expected—to pay more than fifty dollars," said Richard More slowly. "I happen to have that amount with me——"

The woman waited on the suggestion. . . . She looked at the two people before her.

"I'll speak to Mr. Stewart—if he hasn't gone. It's not like regular stock. I don't know whether he would sell it for less——"

She moved away from them down the store and they stood, with all the dummy figures standing around, and waited for her.

Richard More did not speak. He longed to ask his wife whether she wanted it as

much as that—as much as ninety-five dollars. But he could not shape the words that would say it. He almost wondered whether she would understand—if he asked her.

She stood with her hands hanging idle and her eyes looking down. She was like a prehistoric creature—an Oriental Madonna of ageless form and beauty. . . . Almost, he fancied, there were tears in the lidded eyes. . . . He started and turned brusquely.

The clerk was coming back. He looked at her keenly as she came toward them.

She shook her head. "Ninety-five dollars," she said. "But you can have a charge, of course."

His hand moved to his pocket and his eyes were on his wife's face.

She turned, with a shiver of the long silken lines, and she threw back the coat with a laugh.

"How absurd, Richard!— We can't pay all that money—for a whim!"

His hand stayed itself from the pocket. "Don't you want it?" he asked doubtingly.

"Of course not!" She shook the coat from her and stepped out.

The woman caught it with a quick gesture as it fell.

His hand waited, fingering the coins in his pocket. "I think we could manage it——"

"Oh—! I don't want it!" She ignored the woman. She moved swiftly past her and was half-way to the elevator. He sprang after her, with a backward glance of apology at the woman, who stood with the coat on her arm, gazing after them.

In the elevator Eleanor shivered a little, and he squeezed her arm in his in the darkness.

"It's all right!" he said soothingly, beneath his breath.

She nodded and pressed a little against him.

When they stepped into the light he glanced at her face. It had almost a tragic look.

"Better go back and get it," he said peremptorily. "Hang the price!"

But she shook her head.

Half-way to the door, he touched her arm. "Let's get it!" he said coaxingly.

"*I don't want it!*" She turned a gaze on him—half-tragic, half-humorous. . . . "Do you know why I would not get it?" she demanded.

"I don't know anything!" he declared, jostling through the crowd to keep pace with her. "I'm incapable of knowing—*anything!*"

She smiled—a little wistful smile—up at him. "I wouldn't get it. . . . Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I can hear you." He bent his head to her, and they moved as a unit through the crowd. "I can hear you. Go ahead!"

"I thought suddenly"—she gasped a little—"how *awful* it would be if Annabel should ever want to have clothes—things to wear—as badly as I wanted that coat—and all those dear little beasts winding around on it! . . . It wasn't a coat!" Her lips were close to his ear, a little smile seemed to run from them to him, and he laughed out.

"It wasn't a coat!" she said fiercely. "It was a blue and gold temptation—with dragons! I wouldn't have it—at any price!"

"Not for fifty dollars?" he asked—and

he bent a keen look at her unconscious face in the crowd.

"Not if they would give it to me!" she said with swift decision. "I want Annabel to be mild in her nature!"

Richard More followed her. Privately he fancied that Annabel would be a person who would know her own mind. If she wanted a blue and gold coat, she would have it, he thought; and if she didn't want a blue and gold coat, she wouldn't have it, he thought. . . . And William Archer—? Well—blue and gold were not exactly colors to be desired in the case of William Archer. In any case Annabel and William Archer must look out for themselves.

He was going back to-morrow, or the first chance he could, and buy that Chinese coat for his wife. He wanted it for her. . . . As they made their way out of

the store, he saw it again, wrapped about her, and he saw the down-bent face with its look of mystery, rising above the shimmering folds.

VII

SHE seemed to have brought away with her some secret of the coat—a touch of its mystery and charm.

Richard watched her as she went about the house, occupied with little things. He fancied there was a look in her face that came and went shadowily—as if the curtains before a hidden place were swept aside by an unseen wind. . . . And before he could look again—it was gone.

Her face in repose was very commonplace, he knew; it had grown a little full and there was a humorous, almost conceited, little upward twist to the mouth, that he found annoying. . . . And then suddenly, when she was off guard, the look had fled and he was gazing at the strange face.

He found himself growing troubled,

driven by a force he did not quite comprehend—a disbelief in the solid earth and the turning of the seasons. . . . He had sown grass-seed in the new lot; the wall was finished and vines had been planted at its base. But the lot had to his eyes an unsubstantial look. He had an almost superstitious feeling that it had been bought with a price.

He had gone back for the Chinese coat the Monday morning after they were there. He was waiting at the door when the store opened and he hurried directly to the first floor, too impatient to wait for the elevator to make its trip.

The woman saw him coming. She stopped her work and waited. . . . He fancied her look was a little startled.

He told her he would take the coat. He would pay part on it and have the rest charged—he would take it with him.

Little by little he grasped the fact that the coat was gone.

"But we were here late! There was no one else. . . . You had no *chance* to sell it!" He could have believed she was lying to him.

But her face was open—and there was unmistakable regret in her voice. "I would have reserved it for you with pleasure over Sunday, or longer—if you had told me. . . . I thought your wife did not care for it."

"She—she may have thought the price was a little steep," he admitted. "But I wanted her to have it—I intended she should have it."

"I am sorry. A woman came—not two minutes after you left—I still had the coat on my arm. She must have been in the elevator that came up as you went down. . . . And the minute she saw the

coat she stopped. She seemed to know she wanted it.

"I tried it on her right there where we stood, and she bought it and paid for it and took it away. . . . I don't think she meant to buy a coat when she came up. She was looking for something else, I think, and happened to see the coat and took a fancy to it and bought it. I'm sorry you did not tell me to save it. . . . It was much more becoming to your wife. It really seemed made for your wife." Her voice was full of interest and a gentle kindness.

There were no customers in the store; he felt as if he and the woman were alone in a vast place. She was not a mere clerk. She seemed linked with the coat and its destiny, and with their lives.

He thanked her and went away. And the next day he went again to see if

they could get him a duplicate of the coat—if he left an order.

She looked at him tolerantly. "A coat like that," her glance seemed to say, "is to be taken when you have the chance—and not be coming back for duplicate orders!"

"There was not a chance in a thousand," she told him.

"I'll take your order, of course, and I'll tell Mr. Stewart. But they don't make those coats by the dozen; and, besides, it is very, very old—hundreds of years, perhaps."

"I know!" He groaned a little.

He seemed to see all the mysterious color of the coat and the shimmer of its folds—and the look in Eleanor's face. "I hope you can get something like it for us," he said inanely.

He had not gone back to inquire again.

They had his address; they were to send him word if they found anything. Mr. Stewart was to make a trip to the East very soon. She would send him word.

It was left at that. They would send him word. . . . He planned, in the back of his mind, to buy the coat for Eleanor, but not to give it to her—not just yet. He would buy it, he thought, and put it away; and when William Archer arrived, he would bring it out and throw it about her shoulders. He liked to fancy her in it and to think how it would help her disappointment about Annabel. . . . She could enjoy it to the full. She would not be afraid of injuring Annabel or her morals—when William Archer was there!

But no word came and the months slipped by.

VIII

THEN, one evening, Richard More came home from the office and found a new look in his house. He knew it, even before he caught a glimpse of a nurse's white cap hurrying through the lower hall and before the doctor met him at the foot of the stair.

"I am just going," said the doctor.

"Going—?" Richard caught himself. "Has it come?"

The doctor smiled at him—at the ignorance and youthful credulity of it.

"I shall be back in an hour or two. Everything is going splendidly. Your wife has courage!" And he was gone.

"Courage—Eleanor? Of course she had courage! She was made of it. What did the doctor know about Eleanor's cour-

age?" He hurried up the stairs . . . the fleeting sense of life in his quick steps.

She turned to him with the little upward twist of her lip. "It's all right, Dickie!"

There was no mystery, no courage—only Eleanor's competent look as if there were dusting to be done, and men-folks were better out of the way. . . . And yet, behind it, he had a sense that she withdrew to some high place, to a remote, inaccessible cliff, and looked down on him with wide eyes.

He wandered miserably about the house; a part of the night he slept, and part of it he spent at the telephone, sending orders for the doctor and nurse, and answering the door-bell when the response came. . . . All through the early hours he longed fiercely for the arrival

of William Archer. Then, as the night went on, he lost interest in William Archer and his coming, and would have welcomed Annabel. . . . And he cast aside even the thought of Annabel. He longed only for an end to the misery. . . . And when at last the doctor said in businesslike tones, "A fine girl, Mr. More!" he only blinked at him, and his tousled hair took on a more rebellious twist.

"A fine girl! What of it! . . . What had girls to do with this?"

"A fine girl" did not connect herself, in any vague way, with Annabel or with life. . . . Probably a new girl for the kitchen. . . .! Well, they needed a girl! They needed a dozen girls!

He wandered out miserably—and the doctor followed him with a quick look and something in a glass.

"Here, drink this!"

And Richard drank it—and looked at him stupidly. Something was happening inside his brain—things were growing more settled and luminous. A smile wreathed his face.

"It's a girl, is it?" he cried jubilantly.

The doctor nodded.

Richard More clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good work!" he said.

The doctor removed the shoulder gently. He turned toward Eleanor's room.

"You can stay outside," he said as he disappeared. "We shall not need you for a while."

And Richard sat down in his parlor on the small sofa and took his tousled head in his hands and held it fast. He may have dozed a little.

When he got up and straggled to the kitchen, he found a strange woman making a fire in the range.

She had finished polishing off the top of the range and held a black cloth in her hand. The hand was very black, he noticed.

He nodded to her and went past her to the door and opened it. The world looked very fresh. The earth and the grass on either side the path were very dark and moist—as if they had been dipped in some curious fluid, and the sky had a kind of luminous quality—swelling with fulness and a freshness of light.

Richard More looked up at it and drew in a deep breath—and with the intake he understood, for the first time, that all men see the earth new-washed one morning in their lives. He had a

sense of kinship with the earth and with every one living on the earth.

When he turned back to the kitchen, the woman was putting the black cloth under the sink.

"It's a girl!" he said. He tried in vain to keep the morning out of his voice.

"Glory be to God!" said the woman. She turned promptly and straightened her back and beamed on him.

He held out his hand to her and grasped the blackened one. He did not suspect how many young fathers had shaken hands with cooks.

His experience was unique. He looked about the kitchen with satisfaction.

Ellen Murphy brought some broth and put it on the gas-range.

He watched her with kindling eyes.

He had been familiar with his kitchen before. But it had not looked to him just as it looked now. . . . That broth she

was heating was for *his wife* . . . to keep her alive. He looked at a row of sauce-pans with intelligent gaze.

Ellen Murphy tested the broth and went from the room, carrying it with careful hand.

He watched her disappear and looked about the homelike room. . . . She was going to feed Eleanor. Just outside the door was the ice-box, where he had blundered in the night, breaking up the ice, crushing it for the doctor—they had told him to hurry—hurry! . . . Ages ago it seemed. And now Eleanor was to have her broth. She was being fed. . . . Those stew-pans over there were for her. Somehow out of this kitchen, she was to be fed, his baby was being fed—they were all being fed!

IX

HE thrust his hands into his pockets and strolled down the back path to the chicken-yard. He peered through the wire at the strutting fowls. His hair was tousled, there were red rims about his eyes—and he had never felt so alive.

The chicken-yard was close to the back fence; on the other side of the fence were chicken-yards that belonged to the houses at the rear.

They were very common people in the houses at the rear. And the houses themselves, facing on the parallel street, were unsightly and small. Richard had taken pains to have no relations with the houses in the rear. He had an instinctive sense that it might lead to complications.

A man was at work in the yard across the fence, digging a post-hole. Richard's

eye fell on him. He came nearer to the fence and leaned on it and looked over. The man looked up.

Richard nodded. "Fine morning!" he called.

The man nodded a reply, and shifted his pipe in his teeth and thrust his shovel into the ground. His back was very broad, Richard noticed. There was something mighty in the swing of the great shoulders as they flung up the earth out of the hole.

Richard watched a minute in silence. The man paused and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He spit casually on his palms and took up the shovel.

Richard's voice halted him and he put down the shovel and came over to the fence. Richard smiled a little awkwardly.

"I didn't mean to stop your work. I was wondering what you were going to put there." He indicated the hole.

The man's face was broad, and a little stupid. It stared at Richard. Then it looked at the hole.

"It's a new run I'm making for the hens. The old one's dusty."

"I see! . . . You've got a fine lot of birds!" Richard waved a hand.

"Pretty good!" The man eyed them with slow pride. "Got nine eggs yesterday," he said.

"It's a great morning!" responded Richard.

The man's gaze lifted itself to the clear, fresh-washed sky, and came back and rested on the oak-tree across the lot. "*You've* got a pretty place—nice tree over there!"

Richard wheeled and faced it. "I

bought that tree last spring—needed more room—for the children—to play." He spoke with offhand fatherhood.

"You got children?" said the man. His voice was astonished and a little pleased.

"One," said Richard. "A little girl."

The man nodded pleasantly. "I never saw her playing round," he said simply.

"No—well . . . She was born this morning!" Richard laughed out.

The man smiled at him a slow, deep smile. . . . And all his face changed in the light.

"Say, that's great!" he exclaimed.

"You're a man now!" he added after a minute. The rough face grew quiet and strong. And Richard had a sense of something human that stirred in him. This man digging a post-hole had known!

They stood a minute in silence, looking

about them at the morning and the free space of sky and watching the sun that had come over the roofs of the shabby houses.

It shone full in Richard's eyes. He turned abruptly.

"I must go in for breakfast."

The man spat absently on the ground and went back to his shovelling.

In the chicken-yard the hens scuttled about, picking up chaff and bits of grain out of the dust. Over in the corner of Richard More's yard stood the great oak-tree spreading its branches wide; and in the lot at the rear the stolid, unkempt man lifted his shovel and thrust it into the ground and threw out a handful of earth. . . .

As Richard went up the path, he glanced at the house— The blinds of the upper window to the east were being

drawn carefully together. . . . She was lying there in the shaded room. She would be sleeping now. . . . And suddenly he saw her in the blue coat, as if she lay wrapped in its folds—in her slumber. He had a sense of loss—that he had not given it to her. . . . Perhaps he should never be able to give it to her now.

He glanced at the oak-tree, standing majestic in the lot across the lawn with its great gnarled roots protruding from the ground. And as he went up the path he had a sudden blind sense, almost of anger, at the oak-tree and its strength.

X

THE thing that surprised Richard most was the ease and efficiency with which Eleanor handled Annabel—she seemed to know by instinct things that Richard could not understand—and that he could not understand how she came by.

If she reached out her hands to take Annabel, her fingers seemed, of themselves, to curve into the places where they would fit into the spineless bundle and give it support. If Richard tried to take up the bundle, his fingers fell away like the legs of the brittle crab and the bundle collapsed, incalculable and helpless.

"How do you do it?" he would say. And he would right Annabel and try to still her protests.

And Eleanor would only smile gently,

and send him on some masculine errand while she soothed Annabel's feelings in the proper way.

Richard had once watched a cat with her kittens and he had a vivid sense of the kinship of method—so had kittens always been brought into the world and tended; so they would always be—likewise babies.

It was not something that could be read in a book or taught in a school. . . . Eleanor grew very beautiful these days. The little upward twist left her mouth; and if it grew almost too knowing in its sense of the boundless and accumulated wisdom of ages as regards babies—that, Richard decided, was Annabel's fault. . . . Really, to know how to manage a little handful like Annabel might make any one proud.

For one thing, Annabel knew exactly

what she wanted. . . . And she usually got it. She was often disciplined on the way to it, and thwarted—but in the end she got what she wanted.

As Richard More watched Annabel's progress through life, he thought more than once of the regal gesture with which Annabel's mother had thrown back the Chinese coat and cast it aside for Annabel's sake. . . .

And now he saw Annabel!

Life was often very puzzling. But Richard More had not time to spend working it out. He was too prosperous to puzzle. Whatever he put his hand to seemed to flourish. Men came to have faith in his ventures, and to watch for his investments as pointers to success. His business increased and his family increased. . . . William Archer came in due season, and then Claude, and then

Martin, and Christine, and that was the end.

The children grew up healthy and normal, except Claude. There seemed some obscure trouble with the boy, and before he was six years old it had declared itself. Within a year, in spite of expensive doctors and care, he died. That had been their first and their only real sorrow.

It was when they came back to the house from the funeral that he told Eleanor of his second attempt to get the coat for her. . . . They were alone in the house. The children had been sent away during the child's illness and had not come back.

He fancied Eleanor drooped a little as they came into the house; and his mind went out for something to comfort her. . . . It encountered the Chinese coat.

So, as they sat together in the house that seemed so curiously desolate and different from their usual life together, he told her of the morning he went back to Stewart's and of his disappointment, and of how he had never quite given up hope that some day Stewart would send for him and tell him to come and get the coat.

She listened with wide, set eyes—almost like a child to a fairy-tale.

"That was very dear of you, Richard!" she said. And she smiled to him, almost as she smiled to the children, and he felt the quick tears in his eyes.

And then suddenly she had thrown herself in his arms.

"Oh, Dick, I am so lonely!" she cried.

And that was the way she came back to him.

After that, although she still guided

the children and her hand was on the helm in all decisions, it was to Richard she turned for assurance.

She had come apparently to uncharted waters, and she did not try to make soundings.

And Richard More was as puzzled by her reliance on him as he had been by her wisdom with babies and with life.

It did not occur to him that in her reliance, too, there might be a kind of wisdom—not to be expounded by logic, perhaps—but deep as life. . . . For himself, he knew that he had not wisdom to advise any one. He simply did what he could—and when his advice prospered, he was as naïvely and proudly surprised as any one.

XI

THE children were brought up in the oak-tree. Richard made a cradle-box at the end of one of the low boughs that almost swept the ground and there was always one baby in the box on the bough and one on the ground among the roots—a new one that had just come down from the bough.

And then, presently, one of those on the ground—with the help of Eleanor and a chair—climbed to the first branches close to the trunk. . . . Then another one climbed, and another, till they were all swarming in the great oak—no longer close to the trunk, but far out on the branches among the leaves, swinging and lilting in the wind.

The boys played they were sailors climbing the masts that swayed giddily

beneath them; they sat on cross-beams and gazed out to sea; or they were on the scaffolding of tall buildings, hammering great steel beams into place as the sky-scrapers rose in the air; or they were the advance force of an army—scouting aeroplanes, swooping toward a besieged town.

Between the branches of the great tree and the wind that swayed them or drove shrilly against them, the boys adventured on life. But Annabel made of the tree an outdoor home as like the one across the lawn as the leaves and branches and a great trunk shooting up through the centre would permit. The tree-trunk was the chimney, of course, and she had roaring fires in every room, up stairs and down, and cooking and sweeping and dusting, with lively flourishes and much running up and down stairs. She was a

little lonely at times, because the boys —who did not really care for the game— would suddenly desert her for excursions in the aeroplanes, or to shoot arrows from the house-top. She was liable to find herself, at any moment, with her house swept and dusted, and no one to live in it with her. Only down from the top among the leaves and the swaying limbs would come wild growls and quick whispers—intent and breathless calls to action. . . . Then Annabel would leave her dust-cloths and her pots and pans, and creep stealthily up, up, up—till the topmost branch was reached, and the wind blew in her face, and her little pigtails stood straight out with delight and she was filled with the glow of life. For days she would play the game in the top of the tree. And then, some morning, she would find herself back among her trea-

sures—her sticks and bits of moss and leaves, close to the trunk of the tree, going up and down stairs in happy content; and her imagination would grow deep and intent. Her face, pressed against the bark, seemed no longer to need the swing of the dangerous branches and the surging of the wind to rouse it. She would sit close to the trunk of the tree on a solid limb, and play the great game almost without stirring—a deep silent game that stirred her to the very core. . . . The boys were willing to play house with her and sometimes to sweep and dust a little along the branches, and visit back and forth, upstairs and down. But as for sitting on a limb, intent and still, gazing at what went on beneath the line of sight! . . . They left her sitting there alone, gazing at nothing, and fled to the top of the tree and yelled

with shrill vacant calls of delight and relief.

But when the youngest baby, who proved happily to be a girl, when the time for climbing came—when this youngest baby had been pulled and boosted by Annabe up into the tree beside her, and when two of them could sit happily side by side, looking at each other in silence, then there seemed a fairer division of forces.

Gradually the boys, when they ventured far out on dangerous limbs, would feel a silent tug pulling them back to the heart of things.

And underneath the tree where the children played, Eleanor sat with her sewing or reading or with the youngest baby on her lap, and sang to it or played with it till it was time for it to sleep in its cradle-box in the tree. . . .

And Richard coming home at night, or at noon on half-holidays, would find his family there, and he would climb with the boys, or sit with Eleanor under the tree, or play with the youngest baby. Or he would stroll with his pipe back and forth across the lawn, puffing it and listening to the voices that came from the tree, or watch his wife, with the sunlight and the shadow-leaves falling on her work.

Sometimes he took them all for excursions into the country—at first in street-cars, crowding and piling in; and then in the old surrey that was big enough to carry them all; and at last in the touring-car that swept up the miles.

There was no pause in his prosperity; though the tax of the growing family made it a little difficult sometimes to

adjust business and family demands. . . . And then suddenly the money began to come in and pile up faster than he could use it. He was counted one of the solid men of the region; and the family life expanded on all sides. The problem now was not whether the business could afford it, but whether the children's characters could afford it.

Richard and Eleanor sought for expensive schools that would force a child to live simply and fare hard and think keen and straight; and when no such schools were to be found, Richard took William Archer out of the expensive school that was making a nonentity of him, and put him into the business and drove him hard.

And Annabel was brought home on the plea that her mother needed her.

She was not quite strong that year, it seemed.

So Annabel took charge of the house—and of Eleanor and Richard, and of every one in sight.

XII

THAT Annabel knew her own mind, there was no question; and that Annabel also knew her mother's mind, there was no question in Annabel's mind. . . . She was not perhaps altogether responsible for this feeling about her mother. It would have taken a more astute person than Annabel to discover that all that went on underneath Eleanor More's quiet look was not open for the world to read.

Annabel loved her mother and trusted her; and to the best of her ability she took care of her—though she knew, with a kind of fierce pity, that her mother could never be of her own generation, and that she could not know the real nature of the plans and visions that swept before that generation.

"I am a suffragist!" she announced one day in swift assertion.

And Eleanor More looked up with a quiet smile. "I am one, too," she replied.

Annabel stared at her a minute. "I didn't know you were—a suffragist!"

Then she looked at her with slow suspicion.

"You know what a suffragist is, don't you?"

"Yes." Eleanor went on with her sewing.

"Oh—! Well. . . . *I* am going to march—in the procession!" She was watching her mother's face.

"When is the procession?" There was a little upward twist to Eleanor's lip that might have been amusement at her position, or dismay. "When did you say the procession is?"

"Next week—Monday. . . . You going to march?"

"Yes." Eleanor threaded her needle and drew in the end and twisted it into a skilful knot. "Yes—I think I shall march." It was quite casual, and she inspected her work.

"Well—!" Annabel turned it in her mind. "You'd better get a short skirt—if you are going to march. You haven't a thing that clears the mud!"

"Very well."

So Annabel had out her mother's wardrobe and turned and planned, and had a woman in to shorten a skirt for her. And all the days before the parade, she watched her solicitously, and waited on her—as if she were an invalid.

"I can't bear to have you march in that old parade!" she exclaimed almost viciously.

"I don't mind it."

"I don't suppose you do. . . . But *I* mind it for you!" She rumpled her hair, with a quick gesture, like a boy's. "I've no idea what they'll do. They may throw sticks at you, or—eggs!"

"Well, if it doesn't hurt you, it won't hurt me," said Eleanor placidly.

Annabel stared at her. Then she smiled. She shook her head.

"It isn't the same thing," she declared. "You little know—how much it isn't the same thing!"

And, after all, the parade was not so terrible. They assembled quietly, and with importance, at the city hall and marched through the principal streets, and had speeches; and Eleanor and Annabel marched side by side.

And Annabel was so busy guarding her mother from unpleasant experiences,

and looking after her comfort, and providing places for her to sit down when the procession stopped a minute, that she quite forgot to have experiences of her own or to be thrilled or frightened at her temerity, or any of the exciting things that her imagination had cast beforehand.

"I call it a rather tame performance!" she declared at dinner that night, after it was over, "—a rather tame performance!"

And Richard, who had stood on the sidewalk and watched his wife and daughter march past, with a little amused smile, nodded assent.

"You made a mistake taking your mother, perhaps?" he suggested mildly.

Annabel cast a quick glance at her mother's unperturbed face, and her look lightened.

"Mother's a sport!" she declared. "*I* didn't take her! She took herself!"

She was silent a minute. . . . Then—slowly: "I'm not so sure I shouldn't have backed out the last minute, you know—if mother hadn't been so set on going!"

She looked at her meditatively. "You can't tell what mother will do!" she declared. "She does the queerest things—queer for *her*, I mean!"

XIII

THE next week Annabel became flitting in her movements. She began to take an interest in her clothes, and evolved dainty, distracting gowns that made her piquant face almost beautiful. And she multiplied new ways of doing her hair—a new way for each new hat—till William Archer declared she might as well be a week-end visitor.

"Don't you like it?" she demanded. She turned her head for inspection. She had come down to luncheon in a new hat that defied description.

William Archer surveyed it. "Well—it's different! I can't say it's my idea of a suffragist hat!"

"I'm not a suffragist," said Annabel calmly.

"How long since?" asked William Archer.

"Oh—quite a while."

Eleanor was looking on with a little, amused smile.

"Turncoat!" said William Archer.

"I don't care. . . . I'd rather be a turncoat than a—frump!"

"You don't have to be——!"

"They are—most of them—!" said Annabel viciously.

"Why, Annabel—!" It was Eleanor's voice. "Some of the nicest women are suffragists. I saw some very fine ones in the parade."

Annabel turned indignant eyes on her.

"I saw *one* there! And I hope never to see her again!" She said it severely, and the family laughed out.

She nodded her head sagely under its

tilting hat that came down well over one eye, and gave her a young and military look—as if she were winning her spurs.

"You may laugh!" she declared. "It's no place for mother!"

"All right for you, I suppose?" suggested her father teasingly.

"I told you I'd got over it," she said firmly.

"Like the measles!" said William Archer.

She regarded him thoughtfully. "Something like that—you don't have it, and you feel well—perfectly well—and then you talk with some one, or have tea or something, and you get all excited and uncomfortable——"

"And break out—" said William Archer.

"Yes—and see your mother walking

in the middle of the street—ploughing along!" Her indignant glance was on Eleanor's calm face. "I felt just ashamed!" she declared.

"I thought mother walked rather well!" said Richard.

"Yes—*I* was quite proud of mother!" said William Archer.

"Well—I hope it's the last time you'll have a chance to 'be proud of mother'—that way! . . . I never dreamed she would do it!— What made you?" she asked. She turned an accusing look on her.

"Why—I think I—caught it, perhaps," said Eleanor. "Isn't your hat just a little far forward, dear?"

Annabel jumped up and went to the glass and adjusted the hat with conscientious touch. "It looks so simple!" she murmured. "But it really takes *brains!*—

There—how is that?" She turned for approval, with serious, intent look.

"Just like a French cadet!" said William Archer. He had finished luncheon, and was standing in the doorway looking back.

She made a little mouth at him, and when he had gone she came and stood by her father's chair. He looked up.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"There's the matinèe party first; and then Helen's tea—it's her day—and then Harold is going to take me for a spin, if we get out in time. . . . Good-by, dear things! I'll see you at dinner."

She bent and kissed them, and all the elusive perfume and shining color and the little flitting ends of ribbon fluttered with her from the room.

Richard More smiled across at his wife. "Enter *Hamlet!*" he said.

"Yes— It's all decided!" she added softly.

He put down his cup.

"When?"

"Ages ago—in heaven, I suppose." She smiled a little wistfully.

He looked relieved. "Oh—*that* kind of deciding!"

XIV

THEY were alone at dinner. Annabel came in late and joined them, and there were only the three of them in the big room. It was very restful—with the shaded light from the candles; and there was a veiled happiness in the girl's smile—a little wistful look that flitted through it when it rested on her mother's face.

Richard More watched in silence.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked abruptly.

"Fine!" She crumbled her bread absently.

"What make of car is he running now?"

"What make—Oh—!" She looked up. "I didn't notice."

She was scanning her mother's face—as if she had not quite seen her before.

"I saw the prettiest thing to-day, mother—pretty for you!" She leaned forward, still gazing at her. "It would just suit you!"

"Yes?" Eleanor's eyes met the look behind the words. "What was it?"

"A queer sort of garment—not a kimono exactly, and not a coat—just a garment." She threw open her arms with a whimsical gesture.

Her mother's look grew veiled. "Where was it?—where did you see it?"

"At Helen's tea. Mrs. Martin had it. . . . She helped pour and she had it on when she came in. She threw it off in the hall—a kind of regal thing, you know!" She made another gesture and laughed. "And I thought in a flash of *you!*"

Richard More was looking at his wife—her glance met his.

"I am too old to wear a thing like that," she said tranquilly.

The girl shook her head. "It wasn't old, and it wasn't young. . . . It was just like you!" She said it softly, half to herself under her breath, and she nodded to her father with a little shy pleasure in the words. "I kept thinking all the time we were driving—how beautiful you would look in it."

"What color was it?" asked Richard More.

"A sort of blue shade—very deep and rich—and gold things running all over it—a perfectly stunning thing!"

"So you think your mother would look well in something like that?" he said gravely.

His face was turned to his wife.

"I should like to see her in it," said the girl wistfully. "I never thought before how beautiful mother is! She's always been—just mother! . . . I think she's growing pretty," she added reflectively. She was gazing at her with puzzled eyes.

"Go on—tell about the coat!" said Eleanor.

"Why—that's all! I only saw it as she threw it off—and when we came out, it lay there across a chair and Harold said, 'What a stunning thing!' and I said, 'Yes—for mother!'" She laughed and Eleanor smiled faintly.

"And then what did he say?"

The girl hesitated a minute.

"You *are* growing pretty, you know!" she replied irrelevantly. "And you're almost the only woman I know that has wrinkles—nice ones!"

"Silly child!" said Eleanor. But her face flushed a little.

Annabel nodded. "I've been puzzling about it—about faces—lots of those suffrage women—I didn't know what it was—I couldn't make out! But that's it—they haven't any wrinkles!" She said it triumphantly.

"They *do* keep young," said Richard More thoughtfully.

She turned on him almost fiercely. "It isn't young! It's—massage! I've got so I just seem to hate that look—all puffed out and smooth and softish like putty. It's a kind of chromo-face," she said indignantly—"a just-as-good face, you know!"

Her father laughed out.

She nodded savagely. "That's the way I feel, and I didn't know—till to-day." Her voice grew gentle.

"When I get old I'm going to have wrinkles—like mother!"

"There's one on your nose, now—where you're turning it up," said Richard.

"I don't care. . . . Now mother's wrinkles"— she leaned forward and touched one lightly with her finger—"mother's wrinkles are—*beautiful!*"

"You flatter me!" said Eleanor, with a little serene smile mocking the light in her face.

"There—! That's it! Do you see?" She motioned to her father. "That little line that makes fun of you!—I'm going to have one just like that!" She leaned back and looked at the wrinkle with artistic approval.

Suddenly she jumped up and came and put her arms around her mother's neck.

"Do you think I would let any one massage that wrinkle off your face—you

dear old thing, you!" She bent and kissed the wrinkle.

And Eleanor put up a hand to the smooth cheek, close against her own—with the little flush coming and going in it.

"What did Harold say?" she asked.

XV

So Annabel was engaged. And then, almost before they knew it, Annabel was married, and her place was removed from the dining-table, and the circle about the table closed in a little, and Eleanor looked at it with regretful eyes.

But the young people were not far off. And two extra plates had often to be laid for dinner or luncheon, or even for breakfast; so that the whole number of plates for the year was perhaps not much reduced.

William Archer was paying attention to his neckties and socks, and growing fussy about the cut of his hair. And the younger children were coming up with demands for a sensible education that the school system of the country did not supply. And Richard and Eleanor More

still found life a rich and satisfying adventure.

Richard sometimes wondered as he watched her face and the little new wrinkles coming to it—what life would have been if he had married some one else—some one besides Eleanor—the Rumley girl, for instance. . . . He was almost engaged to the Rumley girl, at one time, he remembered. . . . He had blundered along—and heaven knows, he might have married the Rumley girl! . . . The thought always gave him a little fleeting shiver down his back. And then a sense of strength and well-being swept over him—of the inevitableness of life. It could not have been any other way—or any one but Eleanor! . . . She had said that Annabel's engagement was "decided in heaven." . . . That was it!

People might laugh—and, of course, it

was a kind of fatalism—but things like that had to be. . . . The sun *had* to rise in the East to-morrow morning—that was not fatalism!

There was one regret that followed him—though he never mentioned it, and he seldom thought of it, consciously. . . . Sometimes a look in Eleanor's face would bring it back—and he would wonder why he should mind so much—that he had not been able to get the coat for her—the Chinese coat they had seen at Stewart's that day. . . . It was not such a wonderful garment, after all—was it? . . . He had given her more expensive things than that—more beautiful things—had he? . . . And then he would see her face as she stood for a moment wrapped in its folds and looking down.

The day Annabel mentioned the coat she had seen at the tea he had been

deeply startled. And he wanted to speak to Eleanor about it afterward. But something held him. Perhaps she had forgotten . . . perhaps she did not care—so much as he fancied.

Once, when they were going to the opera, he turned in the limousine and caught a flitting smile on her lips as they flashed by a light and he asked her what she was thinking about. She laughed out.

"The Chinese coat, dear. . . . I could have worn it to-night."

He could not have told whether there were tears in her voice. He only thought as she stepped from the car and walked beside him into the lobby that he had never seen her so beautiful; and he had had the happy sense of people turning their heads to look at her—stare a little. . . .

There was a kind of radiance about Eleanor sometimes. . . . He had given her everything in the world—except the Chinese coat.

And the little regret never left him.

Later it came to him that Stewart might, after all, have got the coat for him—and simply be waiting for him to call.

XVI

HE went to Stewart's that afternoon. The store had been enlarged and greatly changed. He had not seen it for years—hardly since the day when he arranged, or thought he arranged, that they were to "send him word." . . . Perhaps he had misunderstood. How foolish he had been not to inquire before. . . . Regretting it all these years—and never asking—when perhaps he had only to walk in and say casually: "You don't happen to have a coat—a Chinese coat—that I left an order for—blue and gold, I think it was —with dragons on it?"

But when he asked the casual question, the girl at the counter only shook her head. She was indifferent.

"Was it this week?" she asked. "I've only been here a week."

"No—it was . . . some time ago," said Richard More.

"Perhaps they will know in the buying department. I will ask."

She was gone a long time. And Richard More looked about him. He would not have known it for the same place—a great skylight had been put in and the floors cut out from roof to basement, letting down a flood of light. And the stairs and elevators were changed—they used to be over there to the left. . . . It must have been just about here that she stood when she tried on the coat. He half-closed his eyes and saw her there—and all the hope and freshness came back to him—and the look in her face.

The girl returned, efficient and indifferent. "They have not had an order. I can take it again." She reached for her pad.

Richard More looked at it distrustfully.

"I think I will see Mr. Stewart himself," he said slowly. He half-started to take a card from his pocket. Then he changed the gesture. He was suddenly thinking of the gold coins he had carried there. . . .

"Tell Mr. Stewart, please, that the gentleman who left an order for a Chinese coat—several years ago—would like to speak with him about it."

There was another long wait—then a boy with buttons and a little proud air escorted him to the top of the building.

"Mr. Stewart don't see many folks," he volunteered, as they approached a door.

"Doesn't he? Then I am fortunate."

The boy nodded gravely and rapped.

XVII

THE gray-haired man at the desk looked up with a sharp line between the bushy eyebrows. He stared a moment and got up.

"Is it *you!*" He held out a cordial hand.

He served on a dozen boards with Robert More—and was proud of it.

"I never supposed you were interested in the Chinese coat!" He touched a paper on the desk.

"Sit down. They said the man who left the order was here—and I happened to have kept the name, 'Richard More.' But it never occurred to me it was *you!*" He was still standing and staring at him as if he could not quite believe his eyes.

"I did not expect you to remember

the order," said Richard. "I merely sent up word—on the chance."

The other nodded. "Oh, yes. I remember it quite well. . . . You see I took personal interest in the coat. I never really meant to sell it. . . . It was a curious garment. . . ."

The two men of business sat silent—as if seeing it before them.

It was Stewart who roused himself first. "I came on it in a town—a little back in the interior. I was there on other business, semi-confidential business for the government—and I saw this coat and liked it, and bought it. . . . I think I had a half-idea of giving it to my wife." He smiled a little absently.

"I did not know you were married," said Richard More politely. He really knew very little about the man. It did not interest him—except for politeness.

Stewart looked at him keenly a minute. "I am not married," he said. "I never have been. . . . If I had married I should not have let the Chinese coat go." He spoke with a certain curious emphasis and Richard glanced at him.

He nodded. "I should have kept it—for her," he said. "I knew enough for that! . . . It gives me a queer kind of feeling to know that you were interested in it too. I somehow should not have suspected it of you." He looked at him thoughtfully.

"My wife liked it," said Richard stiffly. "I wanted it for her."

"Yes—a woman would like it. . . . I remember the woman that had charge of the department—she's been dead a number of years, now—I remember she always liked it. She would keep it in a box—half the time. Wouldn't have it out

where people could see it—seemed to be afraid somebody would buy it!" He chuckled. "If I'd really wanted to sell that coat I should have been pretty sharp with her." . . . He roused himself. "Well, she's dead!"

"You didn't find another one, I suppose?" said Richard politely.

"No—not exactly." He seemed to be trying to recall something.

"There *was* one—I got word of one. . . . But it was far in the interior—farther in than I'd ever gone, or had time to go. I left word in a general way for them to negotiate for it. . . . But they're slow—the Chinese. . . . Ever been there?"

Richard shook his head—a sudden intention came to him.

"Well, it's a wonderful country!" said Stewart. "And they're a wonder-

ful people. But different—different from us. . . . That's where folks have always made a mistake. They think because the Chinese have heads and legs, and wear clothes, they are like us. . . . But they are no more like us than—than trees are like—lions. . . . They're both of 'em alive, and that's about all you can say—" He broke off with a laugh.

Richard smiled. "You know them pretty well, do you?"

"I've spent a good deal of time there. . . . But I don't know them. Nobody knows 'em!" He spoke with quiet conviction and something that arrested Richard's attention.

"I've sometimes thought I should like to go there." . . . He had thought it not two minutes ago for the first time—but it seemed to him now that he had always intended to go—that it was something

he had been moving toward all his life.

The other nodded. "You won't regret it. I mean to go back myself, some time."

They parted with a kind of friendliness they would not have expected from their previous knowledge of each other. Richard had in his pocket such directions as the man could give him.

"I can't tell you precisely where the place is, nor how to get to it. I never knew, myself. . . . And it's a country you have to find your own way in. Go slow and trust 'em. Don't hurry them too much. . . . I wouldn't be surprised if you'd find the coat—if there really was one, like the one we knew—I wouldn't be surprised if you'd find it just where it was twenty years ago when they told me about it. They're a slow-moving people! But they've found out some things . . .

some things we don't know yet. . . . In a sense they've forgotten more than we ever knew," he added with a smile.

"Here, wait a minute!" He went to a cabinet across the room and took from a pigeonhole a yellow and discolored map. He brought it to the table and spread it out.

"Here is the region I spoke of—up here. . . . And these red lines show where I have been myself; and the little blue crosses are places where I got information—the right sort—where people are friendly and intelligent . . . they will not have changed much—" He looked at the map thoughtfully and took it up and folded it in slow fingers.

"I am going to give you this. It may be useful to you, and I may not go myself—I am an old man now."

So Richard More took the map and

went out. He had come expecting to make a business inquiry, in a business-like way; and he had encountered something that was not business—something that the piece of worn and discolored paper seemed vaguely to whisper as it rustled in his pocket.

XVIII

THE next day he brought the runabout to the door and honked once—and waited.

Eleanor coming down the path stopped—and glanced at the car. She quickened her steps, a look of happy surprise in her face.

"You are going to drive yourself!"

"Trust me—can't you?" said Richard.

She got in with a sigh of content. "There are always people!" she said, "and people and people!—till you can't think!" She threw out her hands in a whimsical gesture.

"Well—you can think now! . . . No one to hinder!"

They took the road to the open country. And she rested back beside him. He

could feel her quiet contentment—though she did not speak—not even when they left the open highway and travelled a rougher road that skirted the hills and came at last to the end of a grass-grown cart-path half-way up the hill. He turned the nose of the car a little one side.

"As far as we go," he said quietly.

She got out with a smile. "Farther than last time—isn't it?" She looked about her happily.

"You remember then?" he said. He came and stood beside her.

"Did you think I could forget?"

"It has been a long time——"

"Only a minute," she replied gayly. "Come—are we going up?"

"I wonder—?" He looked a little doubtfully at the hill before them—and there was a hill beyond that, he knew, and another beyond that.

"It's more of a climb than I remembered," he said thoughtfully.

But she was already going on ahead of him, pushing aside the underbrush and walking with light step. . . . The birch stems came between them and he saw her hazily, always a little ahead, ascending the hill. . . . Then her pace slowed and he hurried and overtook her.

He looked at her sternly. "Sit down!" he said.

He spread his coat and she sat down on it almost meekly. She was breathing fast. There was a little flush of color in her face.

She looked about her with happy eyes. "Oh—I am glad you thought of it!"

"You have no sense!" said Richard shortly.

"Sense—? . . . Oh!"

"To hurry like that!— We have the day before us!"

"Have we?" She looked about with a little puzzled vagueness. "I think I must have been hurrying—to get back to set the table for dinner!" She was laughing at him. "It felt like being a girl!" she said.

"*I* shall go ahead after this," responded Richard. "I'm not going to have you fainting away or twisting an ankle, or any other silly thing!"

"Nonsense!"

But when they started again he led the way; and they stopped at judicious intervals—to look at the view and talk of scenery—and Richard kept a careful eye on the face with its flitting color, and on her quickened breath. She leaned a little against him the last part of the way. Then they came out on the open bluff, with the country lying before them.

She stood gazing down at it with shin-

ing eyes. "Nothing has changed!" she cried after a minute.

"Not from up here," said Richard. "Sit down."

He made a place for her by a birch-tree and she leaned back against it and they looked out in silence over the wide country.

Presently he turned and looked at her. She had fallen asleep. Her head rested against the birch-tree and her face wore a soft flush in sleep. . . . Now that it was quiet and the smile was gone, he could see that it was very tired. A quick desire seized him—to keep the face—to stay the change in it. A woman should not grow old! . . . And then as he looked at her, he saw that she was more beautiful than she had ever been.

She opened her eyes and smiled to him hazily. "Twenty-five years!" she

murmured sleepily, and the eyes closed. He moved a little nearer to her till her head rested against him and she slept on.

When she opened her eyes, the light had changed. She sat up with a swift look.

"How stupid in me—to go to sleep! . . . But how wonderful it is!" She was gazing at the darkened light that spread like a veil over the country below. The grass and trees were misty in it—only a winding river caught a touch of glamour from an unseen source and glowed through the dusk. The darkness grew and deepened on the plain, and the sides of the hill were blurred in it—shadowy shapes crept up.

"We must go," said Richard. "The days are short."

"Yes"— she breathed a little sigh— "yes—we must go." She got up.

But he stayed her and she stood arrested, looking down at him.

"There—was something—I wanted to tell you," he said.

She glanced at the plain—with the little gleaming river shining in it. "It is late!" she said.

"I brought my bug-light." He touched his pocket. "Sit down."

So she sat down beside him and he told her of the map in his pocket. He took it out and spread it before her. And she leaned toward it in the dim light—studying the discolored lines as he explained them to her.

"Do you want—to go—so much?" she asked, looking up at last.

"If *you* want to— Yes."

She was silent a minute.

"Martin thinks he is going to be an engineer," she said irrelevantly.

He spurned it. "Martin has sense—he doesn't need his mother—to have sense for him!"

"But an engineer!" she said.

"They will lead the world to-morrow," he responded.

"Oh—!" It was a little sigh of surprise and relief.

"I didn't know engineers were anything important!" she added after a minute. Then she laughed out.

The darkness gathered closer—coming up from the plain—and the little river was only a gleam through its veil of haze.

She looked down on it.

"Very well," she said. "We will go. I am ready to go. . . . Perhaps it will rest me to go."

XIX

THE whole family was at the station to see them off. Annabel had provided luncheon and a tea-basket and little pillows and waxed paper and drinking-cups, and she flitted about her mother with watchful eyes. There was a kind of jealous loyalty in her, as if she would hold her mother by main force from this foolish thing she had entered upon. . . . She went with them into the car and settled the little pillow in place and stood with her hand on her mother's shoulder. . . . Outside, through the window, she could see the others laughing and talking.

Her mother lifted her face quickly. "You will be carried off!" she said hurriedly.

The younger woman smiled down at her—and her face broke in little, help-

less lines. She bent and kissed her almost fiercely. "You take care of yourself! . . . If anything happened to you—!" And she was gone.

Outside, the group moved and laughed and waved inane farewells. Annabel joined it wiping her eyes. She waved her handkerchief at the receding window and dabbed it swiftly across her eyes.

The red light at the end of the rear car receded into a dark tunnel.

Annabel caught her breath. "I don't see why we let her do it!" she said helplessly.

"You couldn't stop mother!" It was William Archer. He tucked her hand protectingly in his arm. "She'll be all right!" he said reassuringly.

Annabel shook her head. They had turned away from the blackness of the tunnel and were walking toward the sta-

tion. The others had scattered a little, and gone on ahead. Annabel's eyes followed them.

"She isn't fit to do it!" she said. . . . "She's like a child. I feel as if I couldn't—!" Her lip trembled, and she broke off.

William Archer smiled down at her. "Mother's all right! She brought us up—five of us. And she's pretty near brought father up—and I guess a few Chinamen won't frighten her!"

Annabel looked at him absently.

"I didn't tell her where I put the extra flannels—for the steamer. They say it's cold—sometimes!"

"Telegraph!" replied William Archer promptly. "Want me to go home with you?"

They stood at the corner of the street. Annabel shook her head. "Of course not!

Don't be silly! . . . I shall telegraph to-night—a night-letter."

"Where to?"

She looked at him helplessly. "I don't know. . . . And she's always been so fixed before! Wherever I went, I seemed always just kind of circling around mother and coming back to her. And now she's off like that—whirling into space!" She made a sweeping gesture of her hands and looked up to him appealingly.

The little laugh left William Archer's face. "There's no one in the world, of course, like mother. . . . Never has been—for me. . . . I suppose all men feel that way—about their mothers." He said it slowly and looked at her inquiringly. "But it seems somehow as if she were somebody in particular—and nobody else could know—how we feel about her."

"They can't—and they don't!" said Annabel grimly.

They stood looking at each other with quiet understanding. They had not felt so near together in years, not since they played in the branches of the oak-tree, and William Archer had called down to her from the topmost branch: "Come on up!"

She nodded to him with a little smile of remembrance and affection, and they turned and went their separate ways.

XX

FROM the window of the train Eleanor More looked out on green fields. They had emerged from the dark mouth of the tunnel into a spring day. The evening light was on the fields, and they stretched away to distant woods. The shadows along the ground caught a glow from the sky.

"Looks like a clear day to-morrow," said Richard.

She nodded quietly. Her eyes were on the level green fields that moved past them, mile after mile.

He put out his hand and covered hers where it lay on the seat between them.

"Tired?" he asked.

She shook her head. Then she drew a long breath and looked at him with a smile.

"How good it seems!" she said slowly. "How good it seems—to get away from them all!"

"We are beginning all over," he responded.

"Yes. . . . I can't seem to worry about what's happening to them. . . . Just a little worry—because I don't worry—that's all!"

"You'll get over that in a mile or so," he replied confidently.

It would seem she did get over it—or at least if she did not, she concealed it skilfully. The little lines in her face smoothed, one by one, and a tranquil look came to it.

She sat for hours as the train moved over the level plain, the look of abstraction in her eyes and the gentleness and strength in her face revealing themselves—as the lines of a landscape are some-

times revealed by a change of light or by the passing of a storm—all the surface life slipped from it.

And Richard More, watching, had a sudden sense of the mysterious force of very familiar things. . . . This was Eleanor's face—that he had known and loved for years; and it was the face of a strange woman, an unknown majestic presence who moved beside him always.

And then the mask of greatness would slip from her, and she would chatter for days about nothing, trivial things—delighting like a child in the discoveries he brought and laid in her lap when he alighted at some lonely station—a flower or a bit of mineral; and the train would plunge on again, dipping around the curve of a hill, climbing along a dizzy cliff, while she sat beside him, her hand a little reached out to him, her breath half stayed by a glance of delight.

"It is a voyage of discovery," he said in her ear.

"How foolish—to want to stay in one place—always!" Her hand swept up to the piling masses of snow, glacial vastnesses that gleamed high above them. "How foolish!" she said softly.

And the strange look of dignity and strength came swiftly into her face.

"A voyage of discovery," he repeated. . . . "Do you think we shall find it?"

She looked at him with puzzled eyes.

"Find—?" she said vaguely.

"The Chinese coat?"

"Oh—!" she laughed out. "Perhaps so. It doesn't matter—does it?" She nodded toward the distant peaks of snow—a faint tinge of pink was beginning to rest on them. . . . "It does not matter!" she said softly.

"No—it does not matter. . . . But I should like to find it—for you."

When she looked at him her eyes were full of tears.

"Foolish boy!" she said, "to care—for that!"

"We will go back—if you say so," he responded. He was watching her closely.

She reached out a quick hand.

"No—Oh, no! We must go on!" she cried under her breath.

He laughed out. "I thought so! You care for it—as much as I do. . . . Only you——"

"I want to go on," she said swiftly. "What would the children say—if we should come back now?"

"They would be a little surprised—to see us walk in," he admitted.

"Very well, madam—to please you, we will go on."

They talked in any foolish way that pleased them, and they did not hurry on the journey.

He had a time-table of the dates of sailing of the Japanese line they were to travel by, and a stateroom engaged on each boat sailing for the next month.

One after one he relinquished them, by telegraph, as the days slipped by.

They stopped off for two weeks at a high mountain inn that they liked; and several times they rested for days in some spot that pleased her fancy.

He watched her face. When it grew fatigued, he gave directions to the Japanese courier who had joined them at a point on the journey, and they left the train at the next station.

The courier came and went like a shadow along the route—sometimes ahead of them and sometimes following, but always at hand when he was needed.

Eleanor grew to watch for his face as if he were a kind of meteor that played a game with them.

"There he is!" she would exclaim at some station as she looked out and caught a glimpse of him. "There he is, Richard!"

And if the train went on without him, she would press her face to the glass and lean forward to watch till he was out of sight.

"What a wonderful people!" she said. "When I see him I seem to understand—almost! And then he is gone! Is he going with us—all the way?"

"Perhaps so," said Richard. "I had arranged with him only to San Francisco. But we can keep him on if you like. . . . There will be plenty like him on the boat. They are all Japs on the boat."

XXI

ON the steamer they were, as Richard had predicted, all Japanese. Not only the crew and attendants, but many of the passengers showed the dark skin and straight hair of the race to the west. There were Chinese, too, and strange foreign faces that Richard More did not know. A few Americans were on board—bound on business or pleasure to China and Japan—but the majority of the passengers were of alien race.

Richard More and his wife sat day after day in their steamer-chairs, looking out to sea and watching the strange faces drift between them and the horizon line. . . . They came and went, dreamlike and vague. . . . Now a face would silhouette itself on the sky, turbaned and dark and motionless against the approach-

ing west; and now gesticulating hands moved swiftly, and sharp staccatoed words flitted by them along the deck. They were in a foreign world, a cosmopolite world — a restless, moving strangeness of life. . . . It was not possible not to feel, deep underneath, the common tie of race or nation that made them one. . . . Only a boat moving to the west—and the faces moving with it.

The courier left them at the dock at San Francisco. Eleanor caught a glimpse of his face among the crowd as the boat moved out.

"There he is!" she cried to Richard, her hand on his arm and her eyes searching the dock. Then the crowd jostled—and the face was gone. There were many dark faces along the dock's edge, watching the boat recede, and she could not see that one was more familiar than another.

She had come to fancy on the journey that she knew the courier a little; but now she saw that she had known only his strangeness; there were dozens like him, and he was merged in the deeper alienism of his race.

He was replaced by a Chinese interpreter who was to act as guide for the rest of the journey. Richard More, searching for a courier who was familiar with the languages and dialects of the different provinces of China, had come upon Kou Ying, who was contemplating a journey home. For a consideration, he was willing to go with them into the interior and to remain with them as long as they wished.

Eleanor had seen him only at a distance, leaning against the rail and looking out to sea, or rolling a cigarette with slow lingering touch in his yellow

hands extending from the wide, silken sleeves.

She fancied, once or twice, that a glance from the oblique eyes rested on her with slow intentness. But when she looked again she saw that the glance was vacant of meaning and that it slipped past her and gazed out along the pathless sea to the west.

"I cannot make him out!" she said to Richard.

"Don't you like him?" he demanded. "We will exchange him at Shanghai. There are always plenty to be had, I understand. But I thought the man seemed intelligent—and the boat gives us a little chance to get acquainted."

He looked at her keenly. "We don't need to keep him, you know."

She wrinkled her eyes in a little perplexity, gazing at the figure that stood

well to the front of the boat. . . . His back was turned to them and the wind blowing against the boat filled the blue coat and trousers like little balloons. One could fancy the thin yellow legs inside the balloons, holding like grim little steel pipes to the deck. There was a wiry strength in the man and a kind of gripping forcefulness that went oddly with the placid face and slow figure.

"I don't know what it is," she said slowly. "I do not dislike him. But he makes me feel as if the world were queer —a little topsyturvy, I think—almost as if I saw a pine-tree lift its roots out of the ground and go skipping along the grass!"

Her husband laughed out. "Kou Ying doesn't skip much!"

"No. . . . His soul skips!"

"All the better for us, isn't it?"

"Perhaps—" Her eyes brooded on the

ballooning little figure, anchored to the deck.

"No— Don't send him away!" She shook her head with decision.

"Well, I'm glad you like him. I fancy he's going to be pretty useful to us later on."

He got up and strolled over to the man, and Eleanor More watched the two figures side by side—the tall, well-built American and the thin little figure of steel in its swelling, puffed-out garments.

Presently they moved along the deck and passed out of sight. When they reappeared, at the other end of the boat, Eleanor was lying half-asleep, her eyes closed and her face very quiet.

She opened her eyes, as they came up.

The oblique gaze was looking down on her out of an impassive face. She

smiled dreamily. . . . Now she understood. The man was journeying too.

"This is Kou Ying," said Richard casually.

The Oriental made a gesture of service . . . and the pine-tree danced hazily before Eleanor's eyes. She smiled a little.

"You are going with us?" she asked.

The stolid face had not changed. But something, far back in the eyes, responded to the smile.

"As long as you need me, madam," said the man courteously.

"We are looking for a coat," said Richard.

"Hadn't you told him?" asked Eleanor, a little astonished. She sat up in her chair.

"No. I waited—to be sure."

The Chinese eyes regarded him, incurious and quiet.

"We saw a coat, several years ago," said Richard, addressing them. "A coat that we should like to find—or one like it."

"A mandarin coat?" asked the man quietly.

"No-o—I don't think so. It was longer——"

"Blue, with gold things on it— Dragons," said Eleanor eagerly, "and marks down the front like this—" She drew a few lines on the paper beside her.

"Ah—!" The man's breath gave a little whistling sound. . . .

"That is a very old coat," he said softly. "Hundreds of years—very, very old."

His face took on a strange, removed look. "It will be difficult to find—I am afraid."

He spoke the words with a clear, clip-

ping sound, and looked out to the west, steadying himself to the motion of the boat.

"There are not many chances of finding it," he said at last with grave accent. "But I will help you—if I can."

"We are depending on you," said Richard More.

The man bowed and walked away.

After that Eleanor saw him often, mingling with the different groups of Chinamen on the deck and talking and laughing with easy familiarity.

"He is making inquiries," said Richard. "He tells me there are people on board from nearly every province in China. He may find a clew before we leave the boat."

It might have been only imagination on Eleanor's part that the groups of Chinamen began to regard her with in-

terest. As they passed her chair, she would fancy for a moment she caught a gleam in the opaque black eyes. . . . Then, as she looked, it was gone. . . . A group of them, by the ship's rail, talking in clear staccato tones, would give her a sudden sense that she was closely concerned in what they were saying. But when she looked, the stolid faces were as impassive as the long black queues depending from each round hat almost to the ship's deck and responding in oblique black lines to the attraction of gravity—as the boat moved up and down. . . . After a time she ceased to think of them. She sat in her chair, day after day, with half-closed eyes, watching the faces drift past and the water beyond the ship's rail rise and fall.

XXII

THEY made no friends on the boat as they had made none in the train. It had rested her to leave all social relations behind as the train moved west, and she showed a strange reluctance to forming new ties. She seemed to have swung free from the past. . . . Richard, as he watched her, had a sense that she gathered herself for something she was journeying to meet. . . . Her face against the steamer-chair seemed to absorb light. It held a still look—as if it waited some signal.

But if Eleanor More, lying in her chair, made no acquaintances on the boat, and if the groups of Chinamen did not seem to observe her as they passed, there were others on the boat who showed open interest in the quiet figure that lay day

after day looking under lowered lids to the west.

More than one woman slowed her pace as she came near the steamer-chair. Sometimes they lingered a moment ready to enter into conversation. But it was always Richard More who spoke to them, and after a minute's courteous talk walked on with them, leaving the steamer-chair to its unbroken quiet.

His care for his wife, his almost reverent watchfulness for the figure in the chair, gave it a place apart, an aloofness that no one broke in upon.

Yet often they saw her, from a distance, laughing and talking with her husband like a child. There was something unwarranted in the sweetness and freshness of her laugh. . . . It seemed to have left care behind, and yet to be filled with sympathy that sprang from a deep place.

A woman with little fine lines in her face and a quick mobile mouth looked at her companion and smiled, as the laugh came to them.

They had been standing by the boat-rail, looking out to sea, silent for a long time.

He returned the smile. "Well?"

"I was only thinking—*she knows!*" She made a little gesture toward the steamer-chair.

"Knows what?" said the man vaguely.

"Everything!" replied the woman. "Things I would give my life for!" She turned her back on him. Her eyes followed the foam in the boat's wake.

He watched her a minute in silence. Then he moved nearer to her and laid his hand on hers where it lay on the boat's rail. "Why not?" he said.

She shook her head and smiled. "I cannot be sure!" She faced him. "If I were

sure . . . I would marry you to-morrow —to-day—any time!" She threw the words at him. "How can one be *sure?*"

He regarded her gravely. "Isn't that what it means? . . . Isn't that a part of it—to take the risk? . . . Suppose there were no risk . . . would that be—love?"

"Oh—I don't know!—I don't know!" She spoke as if urged by something within.

Suddenly she turned to him. "It used to be so simple—to be a woman. . . . One loved and married—and there were children—and then one died. That was all! But now—!" She broke off.

"Yes. Now, you are free—and being free, you must choose— And that means knowledge." He looked at her narrowly.

"Yes!" She moved a little from him. "And I shall know—when I have made the mistake—perhaps!"

"When you take the risk!" he re-

sponded cheerfully. "Shall we go for our walk? That is *safe*—ten times round the deck—six times a day!"

She smiled and placed her hand in his arm and they swung into the easy step of the ship's constitutional.

Six times they passed the quiet figure in its chair. Then the woman slowed her pace a little.

"I cannot bear it any longer—not to know!" She lifted her hand to the figure wrapped in its steamer-rug and lying so still. "When I look at her—I cannot bear it! . . . *She knows.* She has foregathered with the great—! She knows the secret!"

They had come to a stop, and she turned to him. "If I marry you I shall not be happy—" She seemed to throw out the words accusingly.

"Are you happy now?" he asked gently.

"I am free!" she flung back. . . . "There are things women must do—for the world!" She looked about her vaguely.

"This is one of them—perhaps. But—" He looked at her narrowly. "Not unless —you love me."

She looked at him and smiled subtly.

"I want to do brave things. I want to vote and reform cities and states. I want to found kingdoms and rule them! But —I am—going to marry you."

He moved a little toward her.

She held up her hand. "I am going to marry you—because you hold the secret —of the Past. . . . I cannot live without it." She caught her breath and half reached out her hands—as if to a blind god who demanded sacrifice. There was a wistful look in her face.

He regarded it sharply. "You think

you will fathom the Past—by marrying me? . . . That is why you do it?"

She nodded gravely.

He turned his back on her and looked over the rail, out to sea.

"No woman is going to march through my heart, slamming doors behind her!" he said under his breath.

She regarded the obstinate back a minute and her face grew tender. . . . She had become gentle—as if she saw something precious. She put out her hand and touched his arm.

"Don't be afraid of me, Gordon! I will wait—at the threshold!"

He wheeled suddenly and held out his arms.

But she glanced over her shoulder. Only the empty decks—a Japanese sailor lounging by the rail—and the quiet figure of the woman asleep in her chair.

She put up her face with the breath of a kiss and drew near to him. . . . And in her half-slumber, beneath lowered lids, Eleanor More dreamed on. . . . And the boat moved to the west and to the new world—the old world of the Past—new with coming life in the cycles of the earth and the sun.

At Shanghai there were a few days of delay while Kou Ying arranged for accommodations on the river-steamer, and telegraphed ahead for runners and provisions and an escort to be waiting at the various points where they might wish to stop off.

Richard had instructed him to make arrangements that would leave them free to follow any clew that developed as they went. Strings of cash were provided and paid out by Kou Ying with judicious, watchful hand; and banks in the interior

received word to hold sums subject to call. The news of the American who was to follow, penetrated far ahead. . . . If any help were to be had from tradition or rumor Kou Ying had set turning the wheels that would bring it to them as they ascended the long meandering river that stretches from east to west across the country and forms the waterway and news route of all upper China.

Even in Shanghai the little party became the subject of almost official interest. Courteous overtures were made to Richard More of information to be had—at a price.

The capacious suite of rooms Kou Ying engaged for them in Shanghai's leading hotel became an emporium of silks and stuffs and woven garments of every shape and kind. . . . Colored brocades, rich embroideries stiff with

gold and gorgeous designs lay about on chairs and tables; and yellow-skinned merchants from the native part of the city displayed their trays and rolls of precious coats and robes for the American lady's choice.

But she turned from them all with a little smile. "It was much simpler than any of these, and more beautiful—I think," she said quietly.

And when Kou Ying interpreted her words, to them, they repacked the garments in their long trays, and saluted her gravely and retired. . . . Was it only fancy, or did swift looks cross between the impassive faces as they moved from her?

It was as if she were in a veiled world —tissues of filmy thinness. . . . She had only to put out her hand and brush them aside—to find what she sought—some-

thing beautiful and fine and eternal that waited.

Rumors from the old city were brought that Kou Ying sifted with cautious hand. Of some he made notes on the thin, yellow, rustling paper he always carried with him; and some he dismissed with a curt wave that swept the bearers in ignominious retreat from his presence.

They fled from the august wrath of this man who had learned American ways, but who had not forgotten, it would seem, the duplicity and crookedness of his native land!

Eleanor More saw very little of Kou Ying during these days of preparation. Except when he was acting as interpreter for her, he came and went with even, inscrutable countenance, arranging details, directing movements—preparing for the long and difficult journey that lay ahead.

Never by word or movement did he indicate other than the most casual interest in the object of their journey or in his employers. He gave the service agreed upon and he handled Richard More's money with scrupulous exactness; but he showed no other sign of caring for the expedition or of interest in its success.

When the preliminary arrangements were concluded and they sat on the boat's deck looking out across the Chinese landscape that the season of high water made visible on either bank, Kou Ying showed even less interest in their movements.

He sat, or stood, a little distance from them, his gaze resting stolidly on the level fields and low-lying crops, as they moved past. At a sign from Richard he would approach and explain some point of interest, or give information as to the average yield of the fertile soil or the price of crops.

Then, after a courteous moment of silence, he would return to his solitary watching, and the look of withdrawal would come over his face.

Mile after mile they saw the unvarying fields go by, and the multitudinous boats pass and repass on the great river.

For years, it seemed to them, they had been making their way through this fertile land, plying a steady course up the winding stream that led to the unknown country they sought.

Then one morning Kou Ying came to them.

"In a few hours we disembark," he said courteously. "There is a shop in Ichang you may wish to visit."

But the shop in Ichang proved only a duplicate of the shops of old Shanghai, and they returned to the river and moved on—this time in their own boat, a clumsy,

roomy junk that went more slowly and was propelled by the wind or by stalwart rowers—up through great gorges, where the river made its tortuous way—up, steadily up, over rapids or along the smooth-flowing water between gigantic walls.

And as Eleanor More watched the muscles in the half-naked backs, bending to the oars or tugging and straining at the rope that hauled the boat through swift foaming rapids, she felt as if she ascended some great river of a dream world. . . . So Dante may have watched the shades appear and vanish, or a turn of the journey reveal new and mysterious regions of the unknown world.

Already they had fallen into the habit of saying little. They sat in the sedan chairs that had been provided for the upper reaches, motionless and silent.

Above them the great walls stretched dizzily or opened out around quiet waters where the light lay dazzling on distant peaks; or they watched the water as it broke and swirled about the bow and the boat groaned and bumped under the tugging strain that brought it at last one reach higher up.

Often the journey was halted for expeditions into the country on one side or the other as they made their way steadily toward the Thibetan ranges that stretched to the west. But no clew had been reached. . . . Always the courteous reception of Kou Ying's inquiries—always the spreading before them of gorgeous robes and flower-embroidered garments —but no glimpse or hint of a blue coat and shining dragons.

"I begin to feel as if it were a dream," said Eleanor, "we have been remember-

ing all these years—only a dream-coat. It was so long ago!" she mused. "And this is another life." She motioned to the strange fields about them—the low houses among the trees and the carved, fantastic temple rising from the grove near by. "Almost another world!" she murmured.

The sedan chairs halted for luncheon. A little distance away, the bearers sat or lolled at rest. In the distance Kou Ying consulted with a Taoist priest, who shook his head and turned away.

They saw Kou Ying move swiftly after him and press a coin in his hand. The priest stopped and regarded it with passing motion, and spoke a few words again, and shook his head and went on to his temple.

Kou Ying returned to them with the usual formula of failure. He motioned to

the bearers to take up the chairs and continue the journey.

But Richard More stayed him. "Wait," he said. He was searching in his pocket for something.

Kou Ying paused without interest.

And Richard More took from his pocket a yellow paper, and began to unfold it with slow, rustling fingers.

The Oriental's face changed subtly. He moved toward it and reached out his hand.

"What is that?" he demanded.

Richard More looked up. "I had forgotten—that I had it," he said absently.

Kou Ying reached to it. But Richard held it away. His finger traced a line along the paper and paused. . . .

"This must be the place—here?" He looked about him, at the clustering houses and the Taoist temple on the right.

Kou Ying's face bent eagerly above the paper.

"Where did you get this?" he asked huskily. There was a strange, quiet gleam in the yellow face.

"The man I told you of—Stewart—gave it to me. . . . I had forgotten—till now. Will it help, do you think?"

Kou Ying looked at him, almost with compassion, it seemed.

His finger touched the paper. But he made no further move to take it.

"Hold it to the light!" he said.

And when Richard More held it against the light they saw, gleaming high, an imperial dragon and beside it the four strange cabalistic marks.

"It is the royal seal," said Kou Ying quietly—"the seal of a dynasty long since deposed. Only documents of rare value are inscribed on this paper."

He waited a moment in silence. "It will tell us the way," he said slowly. "Whoever sees that paper must speak true words—on penalty of death."

He held out his hand. "Give it to me," he said quietly.

And Richard More yielded it without demur.

The man's whole bearing had changed. His face had lost its sullen look. He gazed down at the yellowed paper with quiet intentness.

Presently he looked up. The smile on his face was youthful and full of light. The antagonism was gone, and the repression and difference of race.

"I wish I had known before—that you carried this," he said gently. He smoothed it in his yellow fingers.

"What would you have done—different?" asked Richard, a little curious.

"I should have served you in spirit," said Kou Ying. "This is the map of the spirit country." He touched it reverently and waited a moment.

"I cannot tell you more. My words would not have meaning—for you——"

But Eleanor More leaned forward a little, with parted lips.

"Tell us," she said swiftly.

And Kou Ying looked at her a moment in grave silence. The paper in his hand seemed to radiate a kind of light and remove him mistily.

"You will know," he said, "—all that the paper can tell. You will know—soon. . . . But I cannot tell you."

He motioned to the bearers and they took up the chairs and moved forward.

And wherever the chairs halted and the paper was presented, there was swift hurrying and obedient response to Kou

Ying's questions and demands. The little procession became a kind of royal convoy. Each village that was entered received it with honor and hastened to serve it and to speed it on its way—almost as if eager to be rid of so fateful a mission.

There was no dallying in progress now, and no detours leading to fruitless results. Each halt found the route ahead prepared and directions ready for Kou Ying's hand. . . . But the end that they sought was always a little farther on—a day's journey on.

They left the travelled region and ascended into a hilly country where the road wound constantly up and the bearers were obliged to force their way through paths that were no longer wide enough for two abreast. At last only the empty chairs could be carried and

they ascended by slow stages, halting often to rest.

"We are near the end now!" Kou Ying looked gravely at Eleanor More.

Her face had grown a little tired, but it held a light that scanned each break in the road with quiet happiness.

Richard More watched her uneasily. "You are not tired?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I am strangely rested. . . . I am getting acclimated, perhaps."

He looked again at the quiet face. It was true that it seemed rested—more rested than he had ever seen it. But there was a pallor about it that touched him strangely.

He took her hand and held it in his as they ascended the hill, guiding her, almost carrying her over the rough places, till the path before them opened out into

a little clearing and they stood on the summit of the mountain.

Below them the path wound downward to a valley of trees and little farms that stretched away to the plain; and in the centre of the valley stood a walled city. . . . They noted the circling walls and the gates and towers that thrust upward. In the midst of the city was a curious and rounded mountain, and on the summit of the mountain two thin, shining trees and a temple with little points and peaks glinted in the light. . . . Below the temple, shrined in the face of the mountain, something glowed. The light fell on it and shifted a little and the sun that had been struggling through gray clouds shone full on the face of the god—hewn from the ribs of the mountain and gilded till it shone like brass. . . . Colossal in dignity and repose, the great face

gazed out over the roofs and towers of the walled city, to the plain beyond.

Eleanor More caught her breath and leaned forward, gazing with quiet eyes.

Kou Ying beside her gave a quick cry and flung himself prostrate on his face. . . . And all the bearers of the little retinue as they came straggling into the opening prostrated themselves, with half-uttered sounds of awe.

Richard More, standing among the kneeling figures, noted quietly the distance of the descending path that led to the city. And when Kou Ying rose and stood beside him, the American motioned with his hand to the mountain and the god that faced them, rising above the city walls.

"From here we go on alone," he said.

Kou Ying gazed at him a moment in

silence. He seemed weighing something in his mind.

"You will need an interpreter," he said gravely.

Richard More laughed out. He touched the string of cash that hung beneath his coat.

"This will talk!"

But Kou Ying shook his head with a smile.

"You must go to the temple—not the one above, but below. Beside the Buddha —can you see it?"

Richard More shaded his eyes, and nodded assent. At the base of the mountain, rising barely to the knees of the great seated figure, he could see the other temple huddled among the trees.

"I can see it," he said.

"Go there—and inquire. Here—take the map. I think we are very near now.

But—" Kou Ying hesitated. "I should feel safer—" he murmured. Then his eyes fell on Eleanor More standing with relaxed hands, waiting, and his face lighted and glowed curiously. He drew aside with a gesture of abnegation.

"If you need me, signal from the gate —or from the wall. I shall wait here with the men—and come if you need me." He bowed gravely and motioned to the men. They drew back and watched the two figures descend the winding path that led to the valley.

Sometimes a rock obscured them, and sometimes they passed under overhanging trees or disappeared beneath the arch of a bridge or fantastic tower that spanned the way. . . . Each time a little nearer to the city and to the great seated figure of the Buddha of the mountain.

And when the two figures halted a

minute at the gate and disappeared within the wall Kou Ying made a significant gesture to the men; and the little retinue in the clearing on the mountain above the valley fell on their faces in silence. . . .

Across the valley, the great Buddha brooded, and above it rose the temple and two thin trees, transparent in the gray morning light.

And on the high plateau that faced the god, the single figure of Kou Ying stood erect among the kneeling men and kept watch for a signal from the gate or the city wall.

XXIII

THROUGH his barred window, the old priest looked out at them with unseeing eyes.

There was an interval and he stood beside them, looking down at their dusty clothes and travel-stained faces with quiet, understanding gaze.

Even before the interpreter came, with his high, sing-song words that translated their wishes, even before Richard More took from his pocket the yellow map and laid it in the old priest's hand, they knew that they were come to the end of their search.

The priest listened with bowed head. Once or twice he nodded assent, and when the interpreter finished, he looked at Eleanor More with slow, kind eyes.

He folded the map and handed it back

and pointed to a little house among the trees. Then he spoke to the interpreter in a low tone and motioned to the figure of the god cut in the rock above, and entered the temple.

. . . . . .

An old man, half-asleep before his door, roused himself. He listened to the interpreter and shook his head. His face was as motionless as the plank it leaned against.

The interpreter spoke again, sharply, and the old eyes turned to him with slow, incurious look.

The interpreter flung one hand upward, toward the seated Buddha towering above; and the old gaze followed it unsteadily—up—up to the great gilded face.

For a long minute he gazed at the god in the face of the mountain. Then

he rose slowly and entered the darkened house.

They heard a sound of scraping within and a creaking, as if a door opened, then silence. . . . The city was very quiet about them—a gentle intoning from the temple and a rustling of leaves on the mountainside.

For a long time they waited in the silence before the half-swung door. The old man appeared and beckoned to them and they passed into the cool quiet.

They traversed a passage and crossed a court and entered a low room.

The room was empty except for two objects on the right as they entered—a shrine to Buddha revealed through the half-open doors the god within; and across the room on a raised platform facing the shrine stood a red-and-black lacquered coffin.

At the sight of the coffin Eleanor More's face changed subtly. She turned to the interpreter.

"Why have you brought us to a house of mourning?" Her hand moved toward the raised platform.

The old man at the interpreter's side spoke a few words. . . . And the interpreter translated in his sing-song voice.

"It is his son—who is dead. He has no other to do him honor," he chanted slowly, as if the words were full of presage.

And Eleanor More's eyes turned to the old man with a quiet look. But the stolid face gave no response.

With a courteous gesture and a low word to the interpreter, the old man moved toward the shrine across the room and, squatting before it, opened a drawer beneath the half-open doors and drew out an oblong box.

The three people standing by the red-and-black coffin waited quietly as he lifted it and turned to them.

"What is it?" asked Richard More.

He had a curious thrill—as if at the end of a long quest he put out his hand in the dark and touched a human hand like his own.

The old man crossed to them in silence, and laying the box on the platform by the coffin lifted the lid. . . . A faint scent of spices drifted out; it floated about them and enveloped them as he took out, one by one, the soft thin papers that filled the box, and revealed lying at the bottom something that glowed and shimmered a little.

Eleanor More leaned forward breathless. Her hands half-reached to the shimmer of blue and gold as the old man lifted it from the box and opened it with slow,

reverent fingers. . . . The dragons played across the surface, and on the breast as he held it up were four cabalistic marks—the signs in the transparent map that guided them on their journey.

They stood a moment in silence. All the color of the coat seemed to gather to a soft intensity, and glow.

Eleanor More caught her breath with a little sound. "I had forgotten!" she said. "I had forgotten. . . .!" Her face was filled with light—a look of happiness pervaded it.

Richard More glanced at her. "Ask him how much it is," he said in a low voice to the interpreter.

The interpreter spoke the words and listened a moment and translated the answer swiftly: "Money will not buy the coat—not all the gold in all the world," he chanted back.

Again and again Richard More made his demand. . . . And again he offered larger sums. But the old face opposite remained untouched.

"Money cannot buy it," replied the interpreter.

It was like a refrain that came and went between the two men, as they faced each other—Richard More urgent, imperious, and strong; the old Chinaman impassive and quiet. His face had not changed from its look of calm endurance.

"He will not sell it," repeated the interpreter. "He only shows it to you at the priest's command. It is a legacy—from mother to son."

"His son is dead," said Richard almost harshly. His hand moved to the coffin with an abrupt gesture. . . . "His son is dead——"

The words held themselves on his lips.

He was facing a small door across the room. His hand fell to his side in a gesture of silence.

The woman in the doorway stood looking at them with deep, intent gaze. Then she moved toward them—as one who comes in her own right.

She spoke a word to the interpreter. He gave quiet assent and waited while she spoke.

"She says the coat is of royal lineage," he translated slowly—"a heritage in her family—since Time. . . . She is of a dynasty long since deposed. Only the coat remains. No one remembers whence it came—no one reads the dragon marks. . . ." He translated the words as they came from her lips in quaint exact phrasing. "But there is a tradition—" his voice went on——

He listened again—a half-curious flut-

ter of his lids rested on Eleanor More's face.

She had withdrawn to one side and stood looking down at the red-and-black lacquered surface of the coffin. . . . Her hands were folded quietly. Something within her seemed to hold itself remote.

His gaze ran from her to the woman who stood speaking the words that he translated, half under his breath——

"There is a tradition—" he repeated softly, "that the coat is immortal——"

They turned to it where it lay beside the coffin. It seemed to shimmer and gather light.

"—a tradition that the coat is immortal," went on the singing voice of the interpreter. . . . "And one day there shall come from the East—a woman—a woman out of the East. . . . And her sons shall cherish the coat!"

Eleanor More stirred a little.

The voice of the interpreter took on a high sing-song note, alternating with the low, gentle phrasing of the Chinese woman's words. . . . "Her sons and her sons' sons—forever."

The voice ceased and the room was very still. From somewhere in the house came a rustling sound that rose and died away.

Eleanor More raised her eyes and looked steadfastly at the other woman. She moved a step—and half held out her hands. But the other did not stir and she crossed the space between them. . . . They were of equal height. As Richard More turned a startled glance, he was aware of something curiously alike in the two figures—a lift of the head, an air of quiet endurance—but more than all, a kind of dignity—something regal—

that stirred vague memories. . . . When had he stood before and seen two women thus? . . . Surely in some other life—in some other age and time, he had looked on at a supreme moment of joy and abnegation.

For a long moment, the two women confronted each other, gazing deep into the other's eyes. Then with a little gesture, the Oriental, in her softly rustling garments, moved to the platform and lifted the Chinese coat in her hands and placed it in Eleanor More's.

Were there tears in the eyes that gazed . . . or only a deep, still joy?

Before Richard More could question—the look was gone. The Oriental woman was moving from them and the door closed softly behind her.

He watched it swing together, with a sense that something irretrievable had

passed—a mystery and wonder—out of life. . . . Then he turned and saw his wife's face.

She was gazing down at the coat with a look almost of fear. "Her sons and her sons' sons—forever," flashed through his mind. . . . She lifted her eyes and smiled at him, holding out the coat.

"Carry it for me, Dick!"

He moved quickly toward her. "You are tired?" he said tenderly.

"No—I am not tired!" She looked about her. "I am only glad. . . . It was a long journey, wasn't it?" She spoke with quiet conviction. "But now it seems short—and easy to find. . . ."

She looked about her again. Her eyes rested wonderingly on the shrine of the Buddha and on the shallow platform with its coffin and the three men standing by it. . . .

"I have been here before, I think—and yet. . . ." She passed her hand across her eyes. "I cannot——"

"Never mind!" He had taken the coat from her and handed it to the interpreter, who was folding it in slow, skilful hands.

The old Chinaman had not stirred from his place, a little to one side. He looked on with impassive gaze.

Richard More glanced at him and a sense of something wonted came to him . . . a sudden vision of the oak-tree with its great roots protruding from the ground, and the low-swung branches. He moved quickly to the platform. From about his neck he removed the long strings of cash and placed them beside the coffin and from his pocket he took handfuls of the Chinese silver "shoes" that had served them on their

journey. . . . They would not need them now. . . . He piled them about the coffin.

The old eyes of the Chinaman gazed straight before him. His lips parted in half-spoken words that the interpreter took up, translating softly.

"He will go to the grave of his ancestors. . . . He is old and his sons are dead. . . . He will bury this son, the last of his race—" His hand touched the lacquered surface gently. "He will offer worship at the sacred mountain and pay vows before the tomb of his ancestors. The money you have given shall make glad the hearts of his ancestors."

He ceased. The old man approached the coffin. For a long moment he stood with hands resting on it—as if he would gather from it something of the strength of the race that was passing. Then with

grave face he lifted the strings of cash and placed them about his neck and gathered up the silver shoes from beside the coffin and took from a little shelf by the platform a red umbrella and a pair of half-worn sandals. With courteous gesture he passed from the room.

XXIV

IN the grove outside the city wall they paused to rest.

The interpreter, who had come with them from the house and refused to leave them till the city gate was reached, had been paid and was returning to the temple.

As they passed through the streets, they had been conscious of curious whispers, glances from behind opaque windows and rustling from concealed doorways and passages beyond—so a hive of bees despoiled of its comb stirs with low-murmured sound and the restless whir of wings. . . . But no one had approached them, no one barred passage to the light oblong box that Richard More carried so carefully in his hand.

At the entrance to the grove he glanced at his wife.

"We shall rest here," he said with quiet decision.

And she acquiesced—a little smile coming to her lips as they entered the grove.

The green light filtered through the boughs. It touched the twisted trunks with a still look of mystery and strangeness.

"How beautiful!" she said under her breath.

He made a place for her to sit down, and as she leaned against the gnarled trunk, looking up to the boughs where the filtering light came through, he was struck again by the pallor of her face.

"You are tired!" he exclaimed. "I shall signal Kou Ying to bring the chairs!" He moved to the entrance of the grove—but she stayed him.

"No—wait! I like it—to be alone with you. . . . Don't call Kou Ying—yet!"

She looked about with dreamy eyes. "It is so beautiful here—and quiet—I shall rest," she said slowly.

Then her eyes fell on the box and she smiled.

"Open it!" she commanded.

And as his fingers undid the cord and lifted the thin rustling papers and drew the coat from its place, she laughed and chatted like a child. And her laughter, sounding through the grove, had something sweet and strange in it.

He lifted the coat and laid it before her. She looked down at it. She put out her hand and stroked the dragons, the laughter still in her eyes.

"For William Archer," she said.

"And his sons," responded Richard.

"And his sons' sons forever," she finished dreamily.

Her hand still stroked the dragons.

"I did not think you—would get it—for me!" she said.

"Of course I should get it—if you wanted it. . . . You had only to say you wanted it!"

"You knew that!" he added after a minute.

"Yes, I knew." A little sigh touched her lips.

They sat a moment in silence. Then he lifted the coat.

"Put it on," he insisted gently.

She lifted her arms to the sleeves and smiled at him as he wrapped it about her. . . . Suddenly the look of pallor was in her face. It grew strangely quiet, and a touch of wistfulness curved the smile of the lips.

He looked down at her, startled . . . the pallor in the quiet face seemed passed to his own.

Hastily he laid down the still figure and ran to the entrance of the grove. . . . At the edge of the path he paused and looked up and motioned—gesticulating swiftly to a single figure on the plateau above.

From his post above Kou Ying started. He leaned forward and lifted his hand in a swift gesture.

He gave a harsh call.

The men behind him leaped to their feet and ran from the trees. There was confusion and hurry and a swift chatter of voices, as they seized the empty sedan chairs and slung them to their shoulders, and moved forward toward the winding path that led from the hill.

From the edge of the hill before he descended Kou Ying looked down again.

The valley below was still. No one moved among the trees.

From the mountain opposite, the quiet face of the Buddha looked across to the plain.

XXV

IN the grove he bent above the death-like face.

A tremor crossed it.

She brushed a hand lightly across her eyes, as if visions fled, and sat up. The color came slowly back to her face.

"I had a dream!" she breathed.

The green light of the grove shimmered about her softly and touched her face.

"It was William Archer and the coat. But I cannot remember—" She passed a hand across her forehead.

"Never mind," said Richard. "We are going to take it home to him."

Her hand dropped to the dragons and smoothed them absently.

"And to his sons' sons forever!" she murmured happily.

At the entrance to the grove, dark incurious faces peered in at the blue-robed figure that rested against the gnarled trunk. . . . The sound of quick, indrawn breath passed among the leaves.

Richard More lifted her to her feet.

"Come!" he said.

They passed out of the grove where the sedan chairs waited them. The bearers prone on their faces on the ground uttered low words that rose in a kind of chant and ended in the long indrawn note of awe.

Kou Ying alone stood erect.

He held out his hand to the blue-robed figure and escorted it to the sedan chair and seated it with grave care.

Richard More took his place in the chair beside her.

"We return by the lower route," said Kou Ying.

He spoke a sharp word to the bearers. They sprang to their feet and touched the handles of the chairs.

"Keep to the lower hill by the spur," he commanded.

The procession moved toward the low hill that edged the plain. And as they made their way up the long slope at an easy trot Richard More's eyes rested on his wife.

She sat erect beneath the canopy of the chair, the blue robe with its gold dragons wrapped about her. Her tranquil face in its white hair looked across the plain. . . . She was more beautiful than he had ever known her! A queen in this robe of the Past!

He reached his hand till it touched the one that lay on the arm of the chair. The face with its tranquil smile turned to him.

And he saw with a start that the blue of the eyes and the blue of the coat were one. . . .

They reached the spur of the hill and Kou Ying gave the signal to halt.

Behind them in the face of the cliff the seated Buddha looked across the plain.

And ahead, far beyond them on the plain, a single figure beneath a red umbrella plodded stolidly on, moving toward the tomb of its ancestors.

And as it went the red umbrella bobbed slowly, a spot of color in the distant far-reaching grayness of the plain.

22509

A 000 676 141 5